Review

Social Representations in Studying Information, Knowledge, and Mediations: A Critical Review

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Abstract: This text addresses the concept of social representations, as well as its uses and epistemological limits in the processes of production, distribution, and appropriation of information and knowledge. From a critical and systematic documentary–bibliographical analysis, this paper aims at shedding light on the conditions of emergency and functioning of social representations and their role in building up shared meanings. The article connects objectification and anchoring mechanisms from the formation processes of social representations with strategies of meaning construction, and therefore, of knowledge acquisition, in relation to information exchange in different psychosocial stages. Finally, we aim at trying to reflect on the socio-cultural aspects that shape information and communication phenomena, and the significance of the mediations paradigm in this regard.

Keywords: social representations; epistemology; mediations; information; knowledge

1. Introduction to Social Representations: Theoretical Bases and Epistemological Foundations

Critical reviews on social representations paradigm are not new (Silvana De Rosa et al. 2018), although analysis linking perspectives from different fields of study about concepts such as information, knowledge, or mediations with original Moscovici's proposal are still somewhat underdeveloped.

When studying the dynamics of the social construction of psychoanalysis as a scientific canon, Serge Moscovici, in his 1961 doctoral thesis under the title *La psychanalyse, son image, son public*, points to Emile Durkheim as one of the forerunners of the idea that representations serve to apprehend concepts in terms of collective knowledge by more, or less, organized groups, and, therefore, as guides for social action. (Moscovici 1961).

Durkheim (2000) gives us a glimpse at a possible theory of social knowledge in several texts. His statements underline the importance of what he calls collective representations as engines for collaboration between subjects facing the same social reality. The so-named "father of sociology" holds the thesis that subjects organize their own individual representations from their experiences and imagination, and that these representations may even transcend their own emergency conditions though collective representations—those representations that arise from interactions between groups of subjects. These collective representations are the only ones with a possibility of autonomy with respect to the individual consciences, and serve as referents of social change. The collective level, including the institutional and massive spheres, has its own organization that is inherent to itself as a new reality, different from the parts that compose it and, therefore, it mediates individual action, even when it gets feedback from that action.

For that very reason, Durkheim argues that individuals are constrained by the social level, even though they maintain some autonomy. In fact, groups share models and representations daily, which they reproduce through both individual and collective behaviors. Collective representations

emerge from subjects, becoming an omnipotent and omnipresent force that intervenes in them and surpasses the limits of wills separately.

Serge Moscovici not only uses Durkheim as a theoretical basis for his proposal, but also includes authors of symbolic interactionism (such as Mead and Blummer 1934), naive or common sense psychology (e.g., Heider 1958), and evolutionary psychology (as in the case of Piaget 1995). Their approach tries to offer a dynamic vision of the social representations to investigate the role that they have on the praxis of the subjects, and their strategies to interact with universes of knowledge.

In this regard, Moscovici (1979) gives individuals an active role in the origin and use of their own social representations. The dynamics established between the daily interactions of the subjects with their objects of knowledge, the universe of previous experiences, and the characteristics of the context are essential elements for the understanding of the emergence and consolidation of social representations. These social representations are always anchored to certain groups and objects in order to apprehend them. This means that the representations "serve to orientate individuals themselves in the social and material context, to dominate it" (Moscovici 1979, p. 18).

Representations are also social because they appear inextricably linked to specific communities and their objects of knowledge. "The social intervenes there in several ways: through the concrete context in which individuals and groups are situated; through the communication that is established between them; through the framework of apprehension provided by their cultural background; through codes, values and ideologies related to specific social positions and belongings" (Jodelet 1986, p. 473).

Social representations are certainly collective, although both terms are not interchangeable. For this reason, Serge Moscovici and, after his works were published, the whole tradition of studies of social representations in groups regarding certain objects of knowledge, have stopped using the Durkheim's denomination. The social matter goes beyond the simple fact of sharing assumptions or notions; it refers to a symbolic relationship that gives a value of transformation from the imaginary of a community and synthesizes the complex intertwining of cultural relations by which subjects are linked with others, in the midst of a determined historical and structural context.

Representations do not exist independently from subjects or related objects. In the words of Denise Jodelet (1986, p. 475), one of the most recognized authors in the theory of social representations: "all representation is representation of something and someone".

According to Ibáñez (1988, p. 45), the Spanish author who made the greatest contribution to the theory of social representations: "The expression collective representations points to one of the characteristic that result in the social character of representations, but exclude others and conduct a certain representation of the social that does not seem fully satisfactory. They are, in our opinion, more than sufficient reasons to justify the substitution of collective representations for the more accurate expression of social representations".

2. Social Representations: Definitions and Methodological Precisions

Despite all the different schools and methodological approaches in the study of social representations, there is some consensus about the fundamental characteristics that all representations must possess to be considered as such. According to Jodelet (1986, p. 478): (1) it must always be a representation of an object; that is, it must be objectified on a body of knowledge; (2) it has the character of an image, and the property of being able to exchange the sensitive and the idea, the perception and the concept; (3) it has a symbolic and significant character; (4) it has a constructive character; and (5) it has an autonomous and creative character.

However, Serge Moscovici wanted to clarify that: "although it is easy to grasp the reality of social representations, it is not easy to grasp the concept" (Ibáñez 1988, p. 32). The above is mainly related to the different theoretical paths to the term, and its epistemological uses by different currents of thought.

The very root of the word leads us to theoretical misunderstandings by accepting a representation as a new presentation of something; that is, an apparent substitution, to place something in place of

something else. Substitution may be made with both imaginary and factual objects, absent or present, but it is still understood as a copy of the original; that is, lacking in capacity for action or autonomy of meaning, always linked to its origins.

The processes of representation always start from a re-production, not a reproduction, of objects of knowledge. This new production of meaning implies a subjectivation that is born from the interactions between the subjects (at all levels, including individual, group, institution, or at a massive scale) and the object itself. When re-presenting a reality, in order to apprehend it and not let it to escape, its disarticulation is facilitated, transforming it into something different, a new quality that distances the representation from its object. "In the representation we have the concrete mental content of an act of thought that symbolically restores something absent, which approaches something far away. An important feature that guarantees representation is its ability to fuse perceptual and concept and its character of image "(Jodelet 1986, p. 476).

Therefore, every social representation contains a meaning of its own, granted in the midst of the process of subjectivation that originated it and then fed back by its own existence, for use by a community of subjects. The way in which the relations of that community with its immediate environment and other groups constrict and enable a social representation also dynamizes its character and gives it a specific value. However, it should not be forgotten that, to a large extent, these relations will be mediated by the representation itself, which demonstrates the recursive nature of the latter.

More than a mental reflection of the world, social representations act as dynamic entities with autonomy, which play a decisive role in the configuration of both cognition and the behavior of subjects in groups. "Here and there we find a tendency to consider that social representations are the inner reflection of something external, the surface and ephemeral layer of something deeper and more permanent. While everything points to see in them a constitutive factor of social reality, just as invisible particles and fields are a constitutive factor of physical reality" (Moscovici and Hewstone 1986, p. 710).

The notion of social representations serves as a holistic framework for understanding the appropriations and actions of groups of individuals in particular contexts, specifically in relation to objects of difficult existence, either by their very nature or because they can affect the very existence of the community.

Although the concept of representations is mainly linked to social psychology, its interdisciplinary construction makes it have an increasing academic use in other fields of knowledge, such as sociology or communication, to name but a few. The gradual acceptance and consequent use of the theory of social representations to investigate diverse and complex processes of appropriation of knowledge objects within communities or groups of individuals, integrating methodologies both quantitative and qualitative, have their explanation in the heuristic potential that it offers, as well as in its flexible way of approaching the links between the imaginary and behaviors, integrating different academic perspectives.

This interdisciplinary richness, however, has paradoxically been one of the most controversial aspects of the theory of social representations. The greatest complexity of the study of social representations lies in their resistance to empirical disarticulation. This is not helped by the abundance of perspectives, each providing different ways of investigating the processes of representation, or by the insistence of a positivist gaze in the field of social sciences. In an academic scenario, with a still strong hegemonic presence of positivism, the combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies to be used after holistic and critical interpretations as advocated the study of social representations adds an adverse context to consider.

The holistic, recursive and dialectical nature of the very notion of social representations contributes to make their research even more difficult, as it happens with other concepts, such as mediation and culture. For this reason, social representations are preferred to be approached from a critical-hermeneutic paradigm, capable of accounting for the whole analytical potential of the concept. The relevance of hermeneutics methodology for the study of social representations relies on the critical and reflective possibilities it provides as "the researcher repeatedly discovers what his or her

assumptions and interpretive understandings were and reexamines them against emerging insights" (Fisher, in Eatough and Smith 2017, p. 196). The recursive nature of hermeneutics can be useful for analyzing social representations as they are embedded in everyday life. In fact, connections between the theory of social representations and discursive psychology for example have been extensively studied and praised in recent times (Batel and Castro 2018) although controversy on the matter continues (Jovchelovitch 2018; Sammut et al. 2018). Nonetheless, the importance of discussing the concept of social signification with a semiotic approach has unquestionably caught the attention of scholars (Veltri 2013).

The theory of representations abandons the methodological separation between object and subject, focusing on the interaction of both social bodies, at the point of interaction itself. In this way, the ultimate aim is to understand the apprehension and resignification of the internal and external reality of individuals within the framework of groups of belonging, which goes directly to capture the way in which the processes of subjectivation of certain objects occur and how these processes mediate the nature and behavior of individuals and their communities (Abric 2001).

Another methodological problem to consider is the necessary consideration of the contexts of production and reproduction of representations. These active contexts intervene in the nature of the processes of emergency, adoption and use of the representations from which they are inseparable as of their own constitution. In fact, the objects of knowledge that feed the representations are structured at least partially by the context that surrounds them, which interacts with the particular visions of the subjects and the extensions of their daily practices in the environment.

The centrality highlighted by the authors regarding the role of social representations in communities or groups of individuals has to do with the rescue of the imaginary as axes to revalue the understanding of the world and the behavior of the subjects in it.

"The notion of social representation places us at the point where the psychological and the social intersect. First of all, it concerns the way in which we, social subjects, apprehend the events of daily life, the characteristics of our environment, the information that circulates in it, the people of our near or distant environment. In short, 'spontaneous' or 'naive' knowledge that is so much in the social sciences today, that is usually called common sense knowledge, or natural thinking, as opposed to scientific thinking. This knowledge is constituted from our experiences, but also from the information, knowledge, and models of thought that we receive and transmit through tradition, education and social communication. In this way, this knowledge is, in many ways, a socially elaborated and shared knowledge. [. . .] In other words, it is also a practical knowledge" (Jodelet 1986, p. 473).

One of the most accepted definitions of social representations is given by Denise Jodelet, disciple of Moscovici, for whom:

"The concept of social representation designates a specific form of knowledge, common sense knowledge, whose contents manifest the operation of socially characterized generative and functional processes. In the broadest sense, it designates a form of social thought. Social representations constitute modalities of practical thinking oriented towards the communication, understanding, and mastery of the social, material and ideal environment. As such [sic], they present specific characteristics at the level of organization of contents, mental operations and logic "(Jodelet 1986, p. 474).

Social representations clearly have an integrating character, which does not mean that it ignores the individual positions of the subjects, their place within the group, and the different focuses that are placed on the object of representation. "All representation is a bias of each subject" (Ursua and Páez 1987, p. 349), although a bias is anchored to the very dynamics of the group in which the individual integrates.

Each representation is anchored to a group and to a specific object through a complex semantic dynamic. Some of the components of representation can be verbalized, stated in the subjects' discourse; others remain hidden and may even go unnoticed by the person accustomed to them. "Social representations manifest themselves in a discursive space, but also express elements of social subjectivity that are not made explicit in discursive forms; they adopt other forms that appear in

the social imaginary, in traditions, beliefs, etc., and which are often maintained as subjective senses, whose expression in the discourses that circulate and in the constitution of social representations is not necessarily identical" (González 2002, p. 110). This poses a methodological challenge that has been solved by representation scholars with instruments that support each other to achieve a global and synergistic analysis.

According to Moscovici (1979, pp. 17–18), a social representation is "a particular form of knowledge whose function is the elaboration of behaviors and communication between individuals. It is an organized corpus of knowledge and one of the psychic activities thanks to which humans make physical and social reality intelligible, integrate into a group or in a daily relationship of exchange, and free the powers of their imagination."

Wilhelm Doise, for his part, considers that representations "are generative principles of taking positions that are linked to specific insertions in a set of social relations and that organize the symbolic processes involved in those relations" (Ibáñez 1988, p. 34).

Both Serge Moscovici and Wilhelm Doise defend the relevance of the concept of social representations against other concomitant notions, such as images, opinions or attitudes.

Social representations are manifested as forms of informal thought, a kind of knowledge that is built on experience and returns to it. As empirical knowledge, they emerge with a practical utility—to guide the actions of subjects towards certain objects of reality with which they must deal. In this sense, social representations are a type of knowledge with a purpose, and act, at least partially, at a conscious level.

The subject is able to transform the world around him within certain limits if he has the will for it. This idea that underlies the theory of social representations directly responds to the need to contribute to social transformation, which has been an essential element of the social sciences since the mid 20th century, if not earlier. "While science tries to construct a map of the forces, objects and events that are not affected by our desires and our consciousness; social representations stimulate and shape our collective consciousness, explaining events and things in a way that is accessible to each one of us" (Banchs 1984, p. 8). The representations facilitate the incorporation of new elements to daily life, renewing the particular schemes or visions of the world, and, with it, provoking a dynamism of the social groups and the individuals that compose them.

Social representations allow the effective appropriation of the objects of knowledge by individuals. Not only do social representations emerge and reproduce themselves around social praxis, they also guide the behavior and action of subjects between themselves and with respect to the object. "Even in very elementary representations a whole process of cognitive and symbolic elaboration takes place that will guide the behaviors. It is in this sense that the notion of representation constitutes an innovation in relation to the other psychological models, since it relates the symbolic processes to the behaviors" (Jodelet 1986, p. 478). This relates to the cognitive revolution of the social sciences in mid 20th century in France (O'Connor 2016).

The separation between the social representations and the social praxis that are guided by them is, therefore, not viable, both from the theoretical and methodological point of view. Although at the empirical level it is necessary to investigate the content and the processes of construction of the particular representations in relation to the object of knowledge, it should not be forgotten that these researches must then be reconnected in social code with the membership groups, under a critical eye always anchored to the emergency contexts. Representations would have to show the mechanisms of appropriation and reproduction of knowledge, and this is only possible if the contents of the latter are interpreted in the light of group behaviors and contexts of action. This is, in fact, a fundamental element that distinguishes research on representations of opinion studies or on the formation of attitudes, for example, moving away from cause–effect studies to focus on synergistic interpretations.

3. Different Approaches in studying Social Representations

It is possible to identify at least four positions that have developed particular theoretical approaches inside the field of representations: the classical school, the structural school, the socio-dynamic approach (the so-called Geneva approach), and Wolfgang Wagner's perspective.

There are also significant contributions coming from Robert Farr in the United Kingdom and María Auxiliadora Banchs in Venezuela. The case of Latin America in the recent years also proves an increasingly relevant development from the Brazilian circle, where significant studies have been undertaken in the field.

The classic school, with a psycho-social inspiration, was born in Paris (France), and constitutes the core of the theory of social representations. This school was started by Serge Moscovici in 1961 and developed, in full detail, by his disciple Denise Jodelet in the later years.

As a matter of fact, it was Jodelet who produced what is possibly the most accepted definition of social representation thus far. She has also specified and perfected many essential ideas developed by Moscovici. The researches by the latter and above all by Jodelet are based on a qualitative approach stemming from the analysis of the discourse and practices about the object of the representation.

Both Jodelet and Moscovici understand that representations are evidenced in language and social actions by specific groups, and highlight the importance of the context. More specifically, media and institutions are considered to be the spaces par excellence where representations in daily life are developed. Both of them have prioritized the use of open questionnaires and in-depth interviews as well as participant observation to unveil the symbolic universe in which subjects build their representations on a specific object.

The structural school, with a psycho-cognitive core, also starts in France, not in Paris, but in Southern Aix-en-Provence. It is the so-called MIDI Group, after the French region, directed by Jean-Claude Abric, which also has Claude Flament as one of its main contributors.

The studies of these researchers are characterized by the interest in building social representations with an emphasis in cognitive procedures. This perspective aims at establishing the assessment of social representations as an organized sets of cognemes (Lahlou and Abric 2011).

Taking Moscovici as a starting point, they developed the so-called Central Core Theory, which, on the basis of the principles of structuralism, tries to explain the way in which a representation is organised.

Following Abric, representations are socio-cognitive phenomena, whose peculiar nature, constituted by a central core and a peripheral system, allows them to be stable and flexible at the same time. The Group has insisted on the experimental and quantifying designs, with which they have undoubtedly contributed significantly to the field of social representations as a whole, although the use of a positivist methodological approach has stirred up criticism.

The Geneva socio-dynamic approach is led by Wilhelm Doise, who has insisted on the study of social representations as spaces for symbolic exchange. In order to understand a representation, we need to analyze the relationships between the social metasystem and the mental universe of the subjects, which are, at the same time, affected by their respective position within the aforesaid metasystem.

The specific social belonging of groups and individuals determines how its representations are structured. As a result of this, Doise's research has the use of correlational statistic methods as its main feature. With a strong social inspiration, the Geneva approach has focused on the conditions under which representations are produced and circulated.

For Doise it is not possible to define representations in terms of consensus, since ultimately they are individual standpoints. Thus consensus in representations would only emerge from the mechanism or organizing principle that articulates the social representation.

Wolfgang Wagner's scope, coming from Linz University, focuses on highlighting the constructed feature of representations. "Instead of imagining representations within minds it is better to imagine

them across minds, resembling a canopy being woven by people's concerted talk and actions" (Wagner et al. 1999, p. 96).

Wagner's proposal, from a culturalist perspective, understands that social representations, though visible in individual expressions, evidence the consensus that characterize them not statistically but rationally.

4. Conditions of Emergency in Social Representations

Moscovici has shown how social representations emerge in specific conditions within contemporary societies, which are characterized by their dynamism and their massifying force. The founder of this field of studies compares representations to myths or legends in ancient times, despite the obvious chronological differences.

Individuals, throughout history, have felt threatened by those phenomena that they cannot handle. Because of that, human beings need a mechanism that turns what is alien into something familiar, a device that incorporates us into reality in an efficient way.

Common sense aims at explaining both what seems inexplicable at first and what disturbs us, helping us to conduct ourselves in everyday life. This guileless knowledge, this common sense focused on action, is what we nowadays call social representation.

Representations are shaped with this mobilizing trait that helps us face certain situations and objects. Moscovici proposes two types of factors that influence the appearance of a representation: organizing factors and factors linked to social determination. The former includes the dissemination of information, focalization, and pressure to inference; the latter comprise central and lateral determinations.

Nowadays it is not easy to apprehend the vast amount of information on any given social object, even when that object is relevant within our own group. Accessing circulating information is not enough; it is also necessary to train selection criteria in such a way that the stories we catch, so to speak, are relevant for our understanding and behavior in our social context. In accordance with Moscovici, in today's world, the fact that information is dispersed needs to be considered as a catalyst of representations because "the data that most people have to answer a question, to form an opinion about a specific object, are generally insufficient and overabundant" (Moscovici 1979, pp. 176–77).

Packages of information fluctuate in quality and quantity depending on the contexts, which are characterized by knowledge diversification and segmentation. Sometimes, due to the high levels of informative bombarding, it is almost impossible to assimilate all the knowledge generated around an object; in other occasions, it is difficult to find significant, valuable data.

Carlos Castilla (Castilla 1981, p. 15), says apropos of a quote that seems inspired by Marcuse: "reducing singular men to an also singular world shows how the existential modes only allow to see some reality or, better even, reality is only seen partly, according to the peculiar ways that the reality inhabiting a specific individual has to structure itself".

Information circulates, it is produced and it is acquired through imbricated mechanisms influenced by cultural norms, the position of the person in the social framework, the nature and ends of the groups to which that person belongs, etc. Furthermore, each one classifies information around the represented object differently, especially when data about it is inaccurate. In these cases, individuals tend to look for support in the group, to contrast, enrich, and/or reaffirm their personal views. The stronger the dispersion of information towards an object, the more it favors the emergence of social representations.

The object of the representation must be important for the social group and the subjects that are part of it; what is more, it must be considered important. The degree of focalization on the object contributes to mobilize the interest to try to understand it, and to incorporate it to the group imagery and practices. Would it be worth leaping into the information chaos that may be surrounding an object if such object was not perceived as coming before lots of exclamation marks? "Spontaneously, an individual or a group grants a specific attention to some very particular areas of the surrounding environment and distance themselves from other areas of the same environment. The distance, the degree of implication in relation to the social object necessarily varies" (Moscovici 1979, p. 178).

Focalization establishes tension towards the object, a necessity to take over that can even provoke confrontations among individuals and different groups. When a new object, no matter which one, acquires relevance within a group, pressures, both internal and external, generate so that the members of that group express and set their views on it. Pressure to inference facilitates that the object, taken inside the group by that sort of filter that we call focalization, expands and disseminates. Thus, we see ourselves in the obligation to formulate opinions and take sides towards the object-topics that the group incorporates.

For that reason, a representation may emerge. It is, indeed, a knowledge incorporated to common sense, stimulated by the sense of urgency that compels us to build a spontaneous judgement on the object, without having time to verify or contrast this or that belief, hypothesis or appraisal.

We obtain raw material to forge our criteria "collecting pieces of dialogues that we have heard, of stories we have read or heard in mass media, of ideas that we have stored inside our cognitive repertoire. The pressure to inference can be felt with those «and what do you think?» that take us by surprise and lead us to judge things we had not previously thought of" (Banchs 1990, pp. 193–94).

Likewise, in urgent processes of representations, social determinations of the environment intervene. To begin with, core determinations impose socio-economic conditions that affect the formation of a representation at a macro level.

The way in which a society is structured and the place where the group and the subjects stand, not only influence the access to information as aforementioned; it also conditions the mechanisms of reference and thought, as well as the nature of the bond that individuals establish with the object.

The determinations that Moscovici catalogued as core articulate in its genesis the systems of orientation that a group address towards an object and, partly, show why for some groups certain objects are perceived as relevant and others are not.

Following Moscovici's postulates, this happens by "linking globally the socio-economic factors on the one hand and the social representation on the other, which will reflect on the state of this the state of those. More specifically, we can say that the state of a given society at a specific moment determines the possibilities of extension, evolution, and interaction of a social representation; but not its complete organisation" (in Banchs 1984, p. 11), since we should recall that representations are not a reflection but a collective construct.

Lateral determinations, however, refer to group factors that mobilize the interest towards the represented object and guarantee the focus and the pressure to inference, along with the information selected as significant. Subjects possess a space of autonomy to take decisions respecting the objects-topics they link themselves to: lateral determinations account for such autonomy and contribute to the birth of a representation.

A group represents an object and re-builds it, granting it a particular meaning while, at the same time, its members also rebuild and redefine themselves in the process. Each group and each subject has expectations, dreams, projected goals, either explicit or latent, which can be answered, at least partly, with a social object within reach.

If with inner determinations Moscovici explicitly states the macro aspects that can favor the birth of a representation, with lateral determinations, he acknowledges the relevance of the micro elements.

Aside of the aforementioned conditions towards the sense of urgency in social representation, as stated by Moscovici, the authors from Aix-en-Provence, especially Flament (2001) have insisted in the need to consider other factors, such as the type of social practice that surrounds the object, which may be tangential or central for individuals, and the attention that such object receives in mass media communication and the conversational processes closely related to the group.

Even the change that involves the appearance of a new social object should be seen as irreversible and significant, and thus it needs to be decoded as a tendency both in and out the group so the inescapable effort of building a representation can be implemented.

5. Formation and Functioning Mechanisms: Objectivation and Anchoring in Acquiring Information and Knowledge

Since 1961, Serge Moscovici proved that social representations were formed and functioned through two continuous, dynamic and interdependent processes: objectivation and anchoring.

Numerous authors, such as Kaës, Herzlich, Roqueplo, Guilly, and Windish (in Jodelet 1986, p. 480), later found that both processes could apply to other forms of thinking, such as the mechanisms of theorization and vulgarization of science, for instance. Thus, neither objectivation nor anchoring are exclusive of representatión phenomena.

Both objectivation and anchoring constitute processes that reveal the close links between knowledge, in its various forms, and the social conditions in which it develops.

As we know, the representations have two insoluble facets, a figurative one and a symbolic one, which makes each one of the figurative or imagery components refer to a given meaning, and vice versa. Following Banchs (1984, p. 15) somehow absolutist conclusion, "objectivation refers to the figurative facet and anchoring to the symbolic one".

Objectivation is nothing but "the layout and form of the shape relative to the object of a representation, putting itself together through a characteristic inherent to social thinking, the ability to specify what's abstract, to materialize the word" (Jodelet 1986, p. 481). Objectivation is an operation that structures, stylizes, and crystallizes the abundance of notions or criteria that wander around in the flow of communications that we are frequently surrounded by.

In this respect, it is quite linked to the dispersion of information as a factor conditioning the sense of urgency of the representations. "Objectivise is reabsorbing an excess of meanings by its materialisation" (Moscovici in Jodelet 1986, p. 481).

Three stages making up the mechanism of the objectivation process have been identified: selection or decontextualization, also called selective construction; the formation of the figurative core, sometimes referred to as structuring schematization (Ursua and Páez 1987; Ibáñez 1988); and, finally, naturalization.

The selection or decontextualization part has a lot to do with the idea of assimilation that Piaget (1995) suggested in his initial studies, which, without a doubt, served as an inspiration for Moscovici. Subjects reject elements of some of the circulating stories and retain others, digesting them to integrate them to the pre-existing universe of beliefs they master.

Selection implies remaking the information following the cultural filter of a given subject and the group he or she belongs to, which explains why several authors like Ibáñez, Ursua, and Páez talk about selective construction. Individuals extract the parts of information they choose to, they decontextualize them and project them as if they were their own. Human beings develop this ability in the early stages of their childhood, as pointed out by Piaget (in Ayestarán 1987, pp. 23–24).

When babies are 18–24 months old, they start to associate objects of the surrounding reality with images coming from multiple environments. This process happens as they widen their vocabulary and their conceptual repertoire. When they are five, they develop the capacity to link social representations, as they increase their interaction with others outside their family circle.

Piaget (in Ayestarán 1987) writes that the level of specific operations that develops from six to eight year of age follows this pre-operational level of representation, allowing the coordination of complex categories to implement specific operational tasks. The upper level, formal operations, is reached in adolescence, when the subject is 16 years old. It starts to be noticed between 10 and 12 years old, and it makes it possible to integrate abstract generalizations with some personality traits. The importance of developmental changes for the theory of social representations has been raised by Duveen and Lloyd (2005) with a special focus on the concept of knowledge.

Pieces of information apprehended through processes of selection and decontextualization consolidate bit by bit. As a result, data is organized in a coherent and stable identity: the figurative core. The formation of this core, as a sublayer of representation, facilitates the visualization of the object by the group. Jodelet (1986, p. 482) explains that the construction of the core, a framework of images

that visibly reproduce conceptual structures, allow to understand individually and at a relational level different events, theories or objects. Through structuring schematization, mankind explains to itself the realities that are unfolded in the environment.

This coordination between the outside and inside world of the subjects seeks an indispensable equilibrium towards physical and emotional adaptation.

The stage of naturalization, which closes the mechanism of objectivation, appears to grant, both the figurative core and the elements that did not consolidate and remained in its periphery, the category of credible and accepted truth. "The figures, elements of thought, become elements of reality, referents for the concept. The figurative model, used as if it really demarcated phenomena, acquires a status of evidence" (Jodelet 1986, p. 483). The components of representation transform into natural entities and acquire a real condition, which is different from the object's. The ideas laid out in the representation are granted full existence, and neglect, to a certain extent, that they are essentially a type of constructed thought, a finalized common sense.

6. Crossroads between Mediations and Social Representations

Representations play an essential role in communication, as well as in the implementation of other daily practices. A representation does not only act upon the communicative exchanges, but it also emerges from them. "As a process and a form of organising social subjectivity, representations generate spaces of communication that consolidate in the society; however, social representations are formed and evolve in the communication process itself. Hence, social representations, communication and the production of social knowledge have a recursive relation" (González 2002, p. 118).

The importance of representations for understanding communication phenomena, including the way it is received and the use of a media platform, such as the Internet, for instance, (Romero-Rodríguez et al. 2016, p. 93) was always clear for Serge Moscovici, who, in 1980, established that the main interest of social psychology was to study the topics linked to ideology and communication, "ordered by its genesis, its structure and its function" (Moscovici and Hewstone 1986, p. 19). This never implied, however, a sense of exclusiveness, since from then on it became obvious that communication was part of a wide range of disciplines.

Moscovici defended, since then, that a good deal of the concepts coming from psycho-sociology —the name he also used to refer to social psychology—such as representation, attitude, perception, or learning were interdisciplinary, since they talked of human mechanisms that could not be reduced to a specific field. From this standpoint, he even affirmed that "in reality, Social Psychology analyses and explains the phenomena that are simultaneously psychological and social. This is the case of mass communication, the language, the influences that we exert on one another, the images and signs in general, the social representations that we share, and so on and so forth." (Moscovici and Hewstone 1986, p. 19).

Moscovici, Jodelet, and Abric, amongst others, have used the global term of social communication to refer to mass communications and the linguistic and semantic exchanges that occur in a face-to-face context, when approaching the decisive participation of representations in communicative interactions and vice versa. In the perspective of the social representations, communication is understood from its widest conception, both at the media and the interpersonal, institutional and group levels. This is not a coincidence: the proposal rejects the classic mediacentrism provoked by the bedazzlement that usually accompanies technical developments in contemporary societies, although it does not neglect media relevance.

Communication and representation are inseparable and affect one another inevitably. In this respect, theoreticians of social representations see communication not as the mere transmission of messages proposed in Shannon and Weaver's informational model, but rather an exchange in which both individuals are active entities.

The research on representations has quite successfully tried to overcome the static vision of the subject-object link. Thus, reality is looked upon through a triple lens: the individual subject, the social subject, and the object.

This approach leads to noticing the existence of a link, which reverberates as an infinite spiral, between the social activity of human beings—within which communication is essential—the environment and the objects of interest. Psychosocial reading of the world, as suggested by Moscovici, although entailing obvious differences, is quite related to Peirce's Semiotics.

Moscovici and Hewstone (1986, p. 21) defends that his approach assumes a continuous and constant mediation. Indeed, since it is located in the realm where imageries and practices come into contact, the construct of the representation, can be applied to the analysis of mediations, if we accept as such "the places from which [we receive] the constrictions that delimit and configure media's social materiality and cultural expressivity" (Martín-Barbero 1987, p. 233), or, also, the "structuring process that configures and reconfigures both the interaction of the audiences with the media and the creation by the audience of the sense of such interaction." (Orozco 1993, p. 61).

A mediation stands in the way and, at the same time, channels the relationships between subjects and objects, just as representations also do. Either they are just mediations (in Martín Barbero and Martín Serrano), a bundle of mediations (Enrique Sánchez Ruiz), multiple mediations, or multimediations (Orozco), the term always refers to a conditioning and conditioned space within which individuals conduct their daily activities, including communication.

Mediations and representations allow us to deconstruct the inextricable links between internal and external universes of human beings. Thanks to the holistic approach they represent when it comes to confronting phenomena, such as cognition, culture, and communication, both categories have allowed us to overcome, at least from a nominal point of view, the fracture inherited by Positivism when exploring such themes.

Insofar representations are expressed in and through symbolic interactions and other concomitant practices, they acknowledge the active and creating character of human beings, the same as mediations do. The latter have restored the signification of individual and social subjectivities that modernity obscured, when favoring science and reason.

7. Conclusions

It seems as if representation has always been there to orient our senses and practices. Thus, something that until that very moment did not belong to our intimate universe incorporates to our subjectivity. It is an object that resembled strange, as if we could not grasp it. Through the naturalization process, the criteria, opinions, schemes, assessments, and reflections within the representation achieve an ontological centrality.

Human beings need their considerations and images to have a shared ground, even if it is minimum. Behind every idea there should be a corresponding object. Besides, we somehow frequently forget the processes to focus only on the results, in the final product. The conditions in which certain phenomenon or object develop are neglected to avoid noises and complications in social understanding.

As pointed out by Morin (1994), thinking expounds the necessity "of ordering phenomena rejecting disorder, discarding the uncertain, that is, selecting the elements of order and certainty, removing ambiguousness, clarifying, distinguishing, organising (objects) hierarchically". As a matter of fact, this is one of the obstacles to assume complexity, which the French author has defended so insistently for so long.

We had mentioned that mechanisms of objectivation and anchoring are in the foundation of any representation, and even other variations of social thinking. However, it is necessary to clarify that each representation implements a different process of objectivation, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the level of reality and the situation of the object and the group (Moscovici, in Banchs 1984, p. 14). The closer to and more indispensable for the group the object of a representation is, the more the representation will depend on the attitudes as a primary and genetic dimension.

In such cases, the contextualization and, above all, the naturalization may be more brief and intense. Thus, objectivation will go by faster due to the daily contact with the object, and, also, to its high focalization among the subjects of the group.

If objectivation explains how social representations are built, anchoring also elucidates its functioning. The mechanism refers to how a representation gets to model and express social relations concerning to subjects. Following Moscovici, anchoring is "proteiform" (in Jodelet 1986, p. 486); that is, it has several overlapping facets. These facets or modalities are three: anchoring as assigning of meaning, anchoring as exploitation of knowledge, and anchoring as a way to take root in the individual's system of knowledge.

The members of a group, depending on their values, possibilities, and social positions, supply representation with meaning. However, if we accept that a representation sets its foundation in the group to which it is linked, then we will have to agree that those foundations are the common denominator for all the elements that form the representation. Such affirmation has important theoretical consequences.

Since they have a common social foundation, the elements of the representation become interdependent, which vehicles the study of the structural and semantic relation among their components. "Such demonstration allows to isolate one of the joints between the processing aspect and the thematic aspect of the representations, and one of the meeting points between its individual and social aspects" (Jodelet 1986, p. 487). Representations are inextricably linked to the groups and their dynamics as collective entities, hence they are a process and a product at the same time.

The anchoring mechanism guarantees that a representation incorporates the social relations that conditioned its surge, but it also makes it possible that representation is a constituting factor of those relationships. After objectivation, the cluster of elements constituting the representation must reach the practical utility for which it emerged in the first place. The instrumentalization of common sense knowledge that is concentrated in the representation agglutinates, through an imbricated network of connective tissue, the social subject, the individual subject, and the object.

That way, the representation constitutes a system of interpretation of reality. "The system of interpretation has a mediation function between the individual and his or her environment, as well as among the members of the same group. Able to solve and express common problems, transformed into a code, into a common language, this system will be useful to classify individuals and events, to constitute types through which other individuals and groups will be evaluated or classified. It becomes an instrument of reference which allows exchanges to happen in the same language and, as a result of that, communication" (Jodelet 1986, p. 488).

Anchoring not only expresses the way in which a representation achieves the value and utility that are inherent to it; it also tells us how the representation is incorporated to the subjective universe of the individuals. The network of considerations associated to the elements of the figurative and periphery core that allows to use representation as a compass that guides our behavior incorporates to pre-existing networks through the anchoring mechanism. "[Representation] does not emerge out of the blue, it does not come into being on a blank paper, it always encounters «something that had been thought before», either latent or explicit" (Jodelet 1986, p. 490).

Cognitive integration of the represented object roots in the thinking system of the members of the group. This rooting process articulates through endless contradictions between old and new schemes that arise.

Such contradictions, to a large extent, explain the duality that characterizes social representations, which can be at the same time innovative and static; something that, as we said, Moscovici calls "cognitive poliphasia".

In order to get acquainted with what is strange, social representations look for a diachronic correspondence between individuals' expectations and experiences. Anchoring confirms the meanings that are assigned to the object as the interaction between it and the group evolves.

The sense the object assumes consolidates and, in case changes are required, anchoring provides with semantic elements to the objectivation, as pre-constructs to modify the representation or elaborate a new one.

As stated, mediations and representations have tried to deepen the mechanisms of interrelation, interpretation, and knowledge of subjects with an emphasis on daily actions, within which the communicative practices occupy an outstanding role. This is important, since it unveils the possibility of finding more than one way to go back along the imbricate common places of symbolic interactions in contemporary times.

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