


What are Social Representations?

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An Introduction to Social Representation Theory


Aims of this session:

- Introduce Moscovici's Social Representation Theory
 - Understand what is/ is not a Social Representation
 - Apply this theory to real life phenomena
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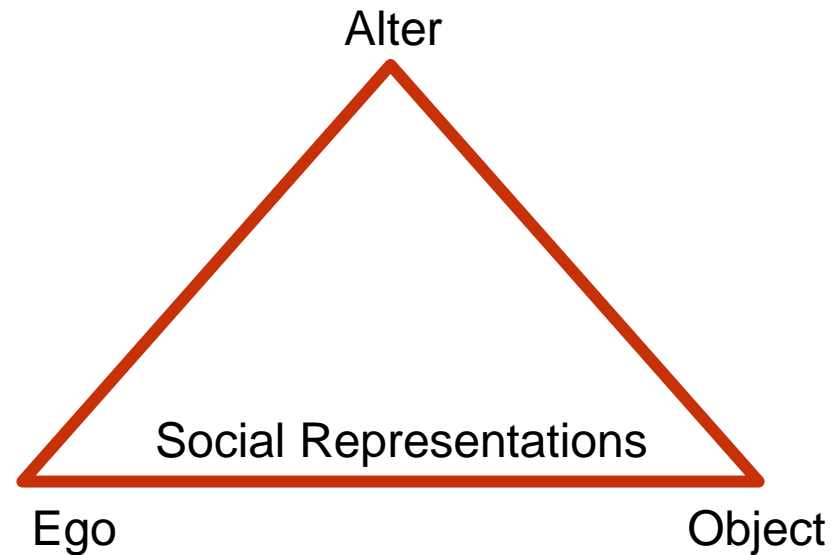


Source: The Economist, 2008

Social representations

- introduced by Serge Moscovici
 - refer to lay theories of phenomena that are important to us
 - concerns systems of values, ideas and practices
 - serve two kinds of functions:
 - remove the “mysterious edge” from new phenomena, bring order and manageability to our world
 - facilitate communication
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Breaking down the term “social representation”:



Social:

- Shared understanding
- Institutionalised
- Historical

Representation:

- Captures a certain way of viewing reality
- Possesses knowledge, structure and function

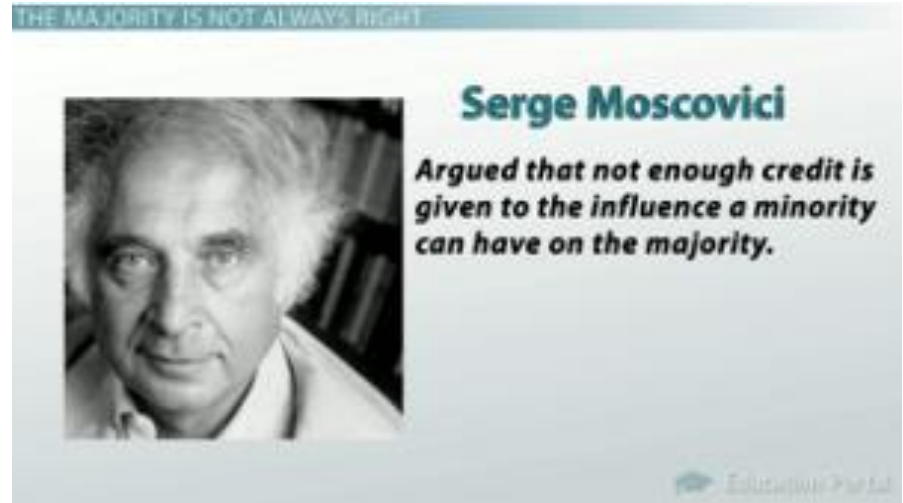
Who is Serge Moscovici?

Born 1928 in a Jewish family in Romania, lived in France since 1948;


A French social psychologist.

Thesis *La psychanalyse, son image, et son public* (1961);


Currently the director of the Laboratoire Européen de Psychologie Sociale ("European Laboratory of Social Psychology")




Collective and social representations

- ***Emile Durkheim (1925)***: collective representations
 - myths, traditions, legends, science, religion etc.
 - static
 - independent of unique individuals
 - were used to explain the life of a society
 - ***Moscovici***: social representations
 - those concepts, images, and theories that we create of our changing world
 - folk beliefs or systems of belief about common objects
 - dynamic, interest in the evolving nature of representations
 - that require explanation as themselves
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Social representations are not..

- only cognitive or linguistic phenomena
 - beliefs or opinions
 - *attitudes* (i.e., a positive or negative judgement about “something”)
 - only individual ways of understanding but a shared social reality
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Main processes in forming social representations

- **anchoring** - naming and classifying a new object in one's previous body of knowledge
 - e.g. cognitive enhancement is anchored to already existing forms of enhancement
 - **objectification** – a process of filling a new phenomenon with familiar images by giving it an iconic form
 - *personification* as one form of objectification
 - **naturalisation** – how new concepts turn to a part of the natural order and start to live a life of their own
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Study of cultural variation in social representations

- different cultures and subcultural groups have different resources of ideas and imagery to draw upon when forming a social representation of something
- therefore they also create somewhat different objectifications of the same concepts
- they may also anchor them to different conceptual frameworks




Examples of related applications

- Representations of history (Flick et al. 2002)
 - collectively significant events are (selectively) incorporated in social representations that enable positioning of ethnic, national and supranational identities.
- Levin Rozalis et al. (2003) showed how the development of social representations as a therapeutic process served to enable a group of habitually violent men to understand and hence manage their own aggressive tendencies.
- Representations of mental illness (Foster, 2001)
 - central aspects of unified “mental illness”: unpredictability, permanency, violence and Otherness
 - some differentiation to mental illnesses

Conclusions:

- SRs are collective symbolic coping
- They are a community's common knowledge
- SRs are expressed in multifaceted ways

Moscovici: *“Social Representations are the collective elaboration of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating.”*



References

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