Varieties of social constructionism in social representations theory and research

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Introduction

Various meanings of social constructionism are used, often indistinctly and implicitly, in theory and research on social representations. The theory, as it currently stands, is used to support at least four different and incompatible *varieties* of social constructionism. My aim is not primarily to advocate any one particular stance, but to bring implicit epistemological assumptions to the fore, and to enjoin researchers to declare and to justify which version of social constructionism they themselves endorse in their research. This is necessary to answer many of the criticisms levelled at the theory of social representations, and to clarify the precise contribution the theory wishes to make.

The first part of the paper presents four different epistemological positions, each labelled as social constructionist, but each carrying different theoretical and methodological implications. In the second part, I will use a number of empirical studies to show that research on social representations has been conducted, at times by the selfsame researchers, under the incompatible epistemological assumptions associated with each of the different social constructionist positions outlined. Finally, I will very briefly consider some of the theoretical and methodological consequences choosing particular positions.

Varieties of social constructionism

The term social constructionism subsumes a variety of very different epistemological positions. Drawing on Latour (1993), I believe we can identify at least four *idealtypes*. All, as I will show, have informed theory and research on social representations.

a) *absolute relativism*

The first type can be called "absolute relativism". Absolute relativism is characterised by a lack of concern with (and even denial of) any extra-discursive reality. Faced with the very real difficulty of assessing the validity of different cultural knowledges, those adopting this position give up entirely on making any claims at all about "reality" – or "things-in-themselves"– and focus instead on the language games people play, on the images they hold, on the representations they endorse. "Reality" is bracketed off; it is *only* what human beings make of it. All that remain are self-contained social representations, but not representations *of* anything. In other words, the relations between social representations and their referents cannot be investigated. In this first version of social constructionism, therefore, the purpose and contribution of the theory of social representations would consist solely in identifying what people say and do with their knowledge, but without relating it back to any external reality. Absolute relativism also presupposes that all cultures are separate and incommensurable; that they cannot be ordered in any hierarchy.

b) *cultural relativism*

The second version of social constructionism can be called "cultural relativism". Cultural relativism differs from the first type in that is does not deny the existence of reality. No; it posits that nature or reality does exist but that its lies outside cultures. A dog is a dog, regardless of how different groups construct it symbolically. Here, researchers are concerned with the social determination of all cultural knowledges, which are treated as essentially equal. No social group has better or worse representations of any one object than any other group: their specific representations are different because they emerged under different social conditions, are shaped by different social structures, serve different purposes, etc. Although this perspective entails no assessment of the relative validity of each worldview, it is nevertheless assumed that each representation bears a certain more or less precise relation to "reality" or "nature". From a social representational perspective, the task consists in describing and explaining how different social groups perceive the *same* reality differently, and to do so without privileging any one representation.

c) particular universalism

The third version of social constructionism differs from the second precisely because it— often surreptitiously and even when actively denying that it does so – does posit that one particular form of knowledge, Science, has privileged access to reality (in fact it defines Reality Itself). Latour (1993) calls this "Particular Universalism" because it asserts the universal validity of one particular worldview: ours. All other forms of knowledge are more or less interesting, functional, exotic or whatever, and worthy of investigation to the extent that they are subjectively real and therefore consequential in social relations. But our own, western, scientific knowledge provides the benchmark against which to judge all others. The aim is to identify the relations between the "truly real" as defined by Science itself, and the "merely socially or psychologically real", as defined by social representations. Thus, while under "cultural relativism", all knowledges (including Science) are socially and culturally determined, under "particular universalism" only *lay knowledge* is so. Particular universalism underpins much of the work on the public understanding of science – even when it grants lay people the elevated status of "amateur scientists" – but many others also share this ultimately realist epistemological position, disguised as social constructionism.

d) symmetrical constructionism

The last position may be called "symmetrical constructionism". Here, "Reality" itself – or rather "realities themselves"– are taken to be the ever-changing outcomes of mutually-dependent social knowledges and material practices. Neither "culture" nor "nature" exist independently of each other: both are co-constructed by human labour, such that we have changing "states of nature" (as Moscovici (1977) would put it) instead of a single, universal, ahistorical Nature or Reality untouched by human practice. This position differs from the three other varieties of social constructionism by its explicit concern with the *ontological correlates of knowledge* rather than an exclusive focus on epistemology. In this sense, it proposes a "strong" rather than a "weak" version of social constructionism. According to this approach, the aim of social representation theory and research is to reconstitute the

totality of our culture's existence: the complex relations between our belief systems, our technologies, our own "ethno-science", our power plays, our economic exchanges and communication systems.

Social constructionism in social representation theory and research

a) "weak" social constructionism

Having identified the four idealtypes, let us now see how they are used in relation to social representations. Perhaps the best place to start is to consider some of the classic definitions of social representations. These suggest that the theory is exclusively about knowledge, and specifically about lay knowledge. Take for instance the following:

Social representations are:

- "branches of knowledge" or "theories in their own right" (Moscovici, 1973)
- "the common sense of modern societies" (Moscovici, 1981)
- "a practical form of social knowledge" (Jodelet, 1984b)

These definitions propose a "weak social constructionism", either of the "cultural relativism" or "particular universalism" varieties. They imply that SRs concern the cognitive and symbolic productions of historically-situated individuals and groups; that they *refer* to material or social reality but do not *create* them. In other words, the study of social representations is concerned with changing ideas, images, evaluations and practices about *unchanging* objects. The representations that interest us are those produced by *lay* people in their everyday life, not by scientists in their academic life and their laboratories. This "weak" social constructionist position is often coupled with a realist ontology.

To illustrate, Herzlich's (1969/1973) study of health and illness, Jodelet's (1984a) research on the body, Gaskell and Bauer (Bauer & Gaskell (eds), in press; Gaskell & Bauer (eds), 2001) research on biotechnology, and Moscovici's (1961/1976) work on psychoanalysis, among others, take a "particular universalist" perspective in that they compare scientific assessments (implicitly deemed "neutral", "true" and "unconstructed") with lay representations. They all convincingly show that lay knowledge about good or bad health, about the structure of the ego, or about

genetically-modified foods is the result of evaluations of complex relations between individuals, society, and nature. But these studies all fall short of applying the same principles to the scientific knowledge they use as benchmark.

The "absolute relativist" position has been much less systematically developed in social representations. Its most prominent exponent is perhaps Wolfgang Wagner. Wagner (1996) generally prefers to write about social representations *tout court,* rather than about representations *of* any particular object. This position, however, remains somewhat ambiguous because Wagner (ibid.) seems to argue that the refusal to use the preposition *of* stems from the fact that reality consists only of spatially and temporally extended representations, and not, as in the absolute relativism discussed above, because extra-discursive reality does not exist at all. This perspective, therefore, also approximates the symmetrical constructionist approach in its challenge to naïve realism.

b) "strong" social constructionism

The other way of thinking about social representations is to investigate both social representations *of* and social representations *in* reality, that is, to study how SRs participate in the creation of new social realities. Here, all social knowledges (whether scientific or lay, western or "primitive") have a *constitutive* rather than an *epiphenomenal* status, although the scale of their mobilisation (Latour, 1993) and power differs a great deal. This is what Berger & Luckmann (1967) meant when they wrote: "Knowledge ... is a *realization* in the double sense of the word, in the sense of apprehending the objectivated reality, and in the sense of ongoingly producing this reality" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 84).

In other words, social representations are both psychological structures *and* social realities. Moscovici (1994) also took this position when he claimed – a little too harshly – that the idea that different social groups have different knowledges about social objects is "a truism of little interest", and declared instead that:

"[Social] representations are capable of *creating* and stipulating a reality by naming and objectifying notions and images, by directing material and symbolic

practices towards this reality which corresponds to them. In short, giving a kind of public reality "out there" and *ontological status* to our representations..." (Moscovici, 1994; 7)

In terms of our typology, Moscovici clearly wished to promote a symmetrical constructionism, a "strong" version of social constructionism.

Some social representations studies have partly endorsed this project. Chombart de Lauwe (1971; 1979) analysis of childhood, Moscovici's (1977) essay on nature and my own research on nature in Shetland (Gervais, 1997) inspired by his work, Duveen & Lloyd's (1990) work of gender, all approximate this symmetrical constructionist approach in that they all focus on the ontological consequences of particular social representations. Jodelet's (1991) study of madness in Ainay-le-Chateau also contributes to this approach through its detailed reconstruction of the total lifeworld of a community, but it neither questions the knowledges and practices of the psychiatric hospital itself, nor does it explore how the mad are, in a very real sense, constructed by the representations of madness circulating in the community.

Some consequences for theory and research

Why are these epistemological questions important? Theoretically, sorting out the epistemological basis of our theory will enable us to discuss more cogently the similarities and differences between social representations and other social psychological concepts, such as discourses, attitudes or opinions. Also, choosing a given epistemological stance either forecloses or opens up the possibility of exploring a whole range of empirical objects (perhaps most notably science), and of making meaningful links with other disciplines such as history, anthropology and sociology.

Methodologically, each position also dictates different research designs. Endorsing a symmetrical constructionist position, for instance, requires researchers to systematically explore the relations between the microgenetic, the ontogenetic and the sociogenetic levels; to focus on SRs in the making, and not only on SRs as already constituted socio-cognitive entities; to investigate material and symbolic practices, institutional life, the production of artefacts, and not only linguistic productions.

The theory of social representations can only gain by becoming more rigorous and internally coherent.

Resumo

O artigo põe em discussão diferentes abordagens epistemológicas relativas ao construcionismo social e suas implicações teóricas e metodológicas.

Palavras-chave: representações sociais; construcionismo social; epistemologia.

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss distinct epistemological approaches regarding social constructionism and their theoretical and methodological implications.

Key-words: *social representations; social constructionism; epistemology.*

Resumen

Este artículo discute distintos abordajes epistemológicos relativos al construccionismo social y sus implicaciones teóricas y metodológicas.

Palabras claves: *representaciones sociales; construccionismo social; epistemología.*

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