PART I

# Foundations

The first part of this handbook addresses a number of foundational concerns that can be traced back to the origins of social representations theory in Moscovici's (1961/1976) study *La Psychanalyse, son image et son public*. Since its inception, social representations theory has contended with a number of conceptual and empirical issues that have drawn the interest and criticism of scholars in equal measure. The lack of conceptual clarity has enabled both a theoretical and an empirical eclecticism to arise over the years, and arguably this has enabled the theory to thrive and to address myriad social and psychological issues in its later developments. Fifty years later, this handbook revisits these foundational concerns in order to take stock of the contributions that have shaped the theory's development and to elucidate the characteristic contribution that social representations theory has made to social and cultural psychology in the understanding and explanation of social and psychological phenomena.

The five chapters of this opening part of the book disambiguate certain notions that have proven thorny over the years, such as the scope of action in social representations and the theory's relevance in the study and explanation of human behaviour. They also address the merits and concerns of theorizing and conceptualizing 'representations' and the 'social'. In doing so, they are intended to help the reader to understand what analytical and explanatory levels the theory is suited to address, and to identify the sort of phenomena that the theory has served to investigate. Finally, this part of the book aims to provide the reader with a blueprint for further developments and applications. It presents a wide-ranging discussion of empirical methods in order to provide social representations scholars and researchers with the required toolkit for an enquiry into social affairs and human conduct.

# 1 Social representations: a revolutionary paradigm?

Gordon Sammut, Eleni Andreouli, George Gaskell and Jaan Valsiner

Against the prevailing view that progress in science is characterized by the progressive accumulation of knowledge, Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* of 1962 introduced the idea of revolutionary paradigm shifts. For Kuhn, everyday science is normal science in which scientists are engaged in problem solving activities set in the context of a widely accepted paradigm that constitutes a broad acceptance of a fundamental theoretical framework, an agreement on researchable phenomena and on the appropriate methodology. But, on occasions normal science throws up vexing issues and anomalous results. In response, some scientists carry on regardless, while others begin to lose confidence in the paradigm and look to other options, namely rival paradigms. As more and more scientists switch allegiance to the rival paradigm, the revolution gathers pace, supported by the indoctrination of students through lectures, academic papers and textbooks. In response to critics, including Lakatos who suggested that his depiction reduced scientific progress to mob psychology, Kuhn offered a set of criteria that contributed to the apparent 'gestalt switch' from the old to the new paradigm. But that is another story, as indeed is Kuhn's claim that the social sciences are pre-paradigmatic – in other words, that the only consensus is that there is no consensus.

Yet, consider this paragraph from a leading theorist of social psychology, Michael Billig (1991, pp. 57–58):

> One of the most important recent developments in European social psychology has been the emergence of the concept of social representations. The emergence of a new concept does not always indicate the formulation of a new idea. Sometimes in social psychology a concept is created to describe a novelty of experimental procedure, and sometimes to accord scientific pretentions to a well-known truism. By contrast, what has characterized the concept of social representations has been the intellectual ambition of its adherents. They have announced an intellectual revolution to shift social psychology to the traditions of European social science. Serge Moscovici, who has been both the Marx and Lenin of this revolutionary movement, has advocated a fundamental reorientation of social psychology around the concept of social representations. This revolution, if successful, will affect both pure and applied social psychology. In fact, the whole discipline will become more applied in the sense that the emphasis will be shifted from laboratory studies, which seek to isolate variables in the abstract, towards being a social science, which examines socially shared

> beliefs, or social representations, in their actual context. According to Moscovici, this reorientation would transform the discipline into an 'anthropological and a historical science'. (1984, p. 948)

Even without Kuhn's blessing, this statement points to social representations as a paradigm shift – a change in the intellectual agenda and scope of the discipline of social psychology; a more catholic approach to research methods, and a movement towards the study of social phenomena in context (Branco and Valsiner, 1997). Psychology is in dire need of a transformation in its methodology in order for it to live up to science – a new science of the processes of human being (Valsiner, 2014).

In this introduction we explore the origins of social representations theory, the theory's foundational concepts, and recent developments in theorizing and researching social representations. There is a great intellectual richness in this realm of knowledge. Since Moscovici's original work, the field has been an arena for interdisciplinary scholarship.

## Locating the social representations approach

For a long time the discipline of psychology has had as its central focus the study of human behaviour. The research agenda fashioned by the early behaviourists is somewhat obsolete nowadays, but the quest for explaining human behaviour still permeates the discipline. The notion that all it takes for human beings to behave in one way or another is positive or negative reinforcement, is by and large accepted as a simplistic explanation of human behaviour. Interestingly, the core concept of 'behaviour' is taken for granted in that tradition; questions about whether non-observed human acts of conduct (e.g. a person's decision to act in a socially non-approved way being inhibited by his/her moral norms) can qualify as 'behaviour' have not been asked, nor answered. Human conduct is replete with such inhibited (= non-occurring) 'behaviours' – hence the behaviourist track misses many relevant psychological phenomena.

This paradox – the indeterminacy of what is 'behaviour'? – is not new (see also Chapter 2 in this volume). Early critics of the behaviourist approach are nowadays cited as classical authors due to the impetus they provided the discipline in their search for alternative explanations of human conduct. Most notably, the Gestaltists rejected behaviourist explanations and introduced the idea that the human mind imposes meaning on sensory stimuli. Consequently, in advancing explanations for human behaviour it is necessary to consider cognitive processes that lead to the perception of a stimulus. Cognitive processing determines which stimuli are attended to, how they are perceived, and how that information is translated into behaviour. The historical outcome of this criticism was that the study of cognition took centre stage over the study of behaviour in defining the psychological

agenda. Characteristic explanations of human conduct today typically investigate an extensive list of independent variables (i.e. stimuli) that determine, when they all come together in characteristic ways, certain behavioural responses (i.e. dependent variables).

The Gestaltists' critique of behaviourism (Asch, 1952/1987) provided the foundations for the cognitive approach to psychology which dominates the discipline today. Yet it was not the only critique to be levelled at the behaviourist approach to psychology. Nor was the influence of some of the Gestaltists' core ideas limited to the cognitive school. Other critiques levelled at the behaviourist approach were sociocultural or sociopolitical in nature (e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Harré and Secord, 1972; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Billig, 1987). In essence, these criticisms were based on three core tenets. Firstly, how human beings interpret events and understand their social and physical surroundings depends fundamentally on the cultural and political context in which they are embedded. Secondly, human beings are agentic; their actions are not merely behavioural responses, but rather, human action is volitional, purposive and meaningful. Thirdly, humans are inherently social. That is, their psychological activity is oriented towards others in a systemic way. When people come together they do not merely aggregate; they form social groups (Lewin, 1936) within which they function in line with the group's norms, purposes and goals.

The social representations approach, like the Gestalist, social constructionist, discursive, rhetorical and sociocultural approaches to psychology, is faithful to these core tenets. Further, it adds a component to the understanding of human behaviour by way of social representations. In Moscovici's (1984b) own diagrammatic formulation, social representations frame S-R responses in that a stimulus is understood as a certain stimulus warranting a certain response according to a social representation that describes the event in an intelligible way for the human subject, given the conditions in which they find themselves (Wagner, 1993). This notion has led to the social representations approach emerging as a countervailing paradigm in psychology (Farr, 1996). According to Himmelweit (1990), it presents a molar view of human activity that is temporally extended in space and time, as opposed to the molecular view of considering human behaviour in discrete terms. In other words, for a given stimulus to elicit a given response, a social representation must associate that particular stimulus with a particular response in an intelligible way for the human subject. To give an example, for somebody to call the police when hearing a gunshot, a social representation of law and order prohibiting the use of guns is required. In certain cultural contexts, or indeed in certain situations, a different social representation might be at play that would lead to a different behavioural outcome. For instance, one might respond very differently to hearing a gunshot at a military parade. The difference between the two situations that leads to an expected difference in behavioural responses is the intelligibility of the social situation from the respondent's point of view. The social representations approach thus brings about a focus on meaning-making

processes and the intelligibility of situations in understanding human psychological activity.

## Rationale and origins

The roots of the social representations approach can be traced to Durkheim's distinction between individual representations and collective representations (Durkheim 1924/1974). Durkheim discarded the former in favour of the latter in his efforts to understand collective ways of life that determined custom and practice in particular societies. The distinction remained in Moscovici's (1961/1976) original postulation of social representations in his investigation of the meanings of psychoanalysis in France. Moscovici argued, however, that it was more pertinent to speak of social rather than collective representations, due to the plurality of representations that exist in contemporary public spheres (Jovchelovitch, 2007; also Chapter 11 in this volume). This condition is termed *cognitive polyphasia* and refers to the coexistence of different and potentially incommensurable representations within the same public, or indeed, the same individual. Collective representations in the Durkheimian sense are hegemonic. Moscovici noted that different social representations of psychoanalysis circulated in the same public sphere in France. He went on to distinguish between *hegemonic* representations that are similar to collective representations in that they are shared by all members of a highly structured group; *emancipated* representations that are characteristic of subgroups who create their own versions of reality; and *polemical* representations that are marked by controversy (Moscovici, 1988). The central idea here is that a social group develops some intelligible understanding of certain aspects of reality, which comes to inform the various perspectives of the members of that group. Individual members of the group thus come to see the world around them, or certain salient social events, in group-characteristic ways. The meaning of things in our environment is thus not a given of the things themselves. Rather, it is 'represented' as a forged understanding between social subjects oriented to the same social phenomenon.

Meaning-making is therefore an imperative concern in the social representations approach. Social representations have been defined as systems of values, ideas and practices that serve to establish social order and facilitate communication (Moscovici, 1973). They arise in an effort to make the unfamiliar familiar (Moscovici, 1984b). In this way they enable the achievement of a shared social reality. On the one hand, they conventionalize objects, persons and events by placing them in a familiar context. On the other hand, they serve to guide meaningful social interaction (Sammut and Howarth, 2014). The social representations approach has thus become a primary method for studying common sense in different social and cultural groups. Rather than judging a group's ways by the normative code of one's own sociocultural group, researchers adopt the social representations approach to gain an insight into the system of knowledge (common sense) that justifies certain human practices.

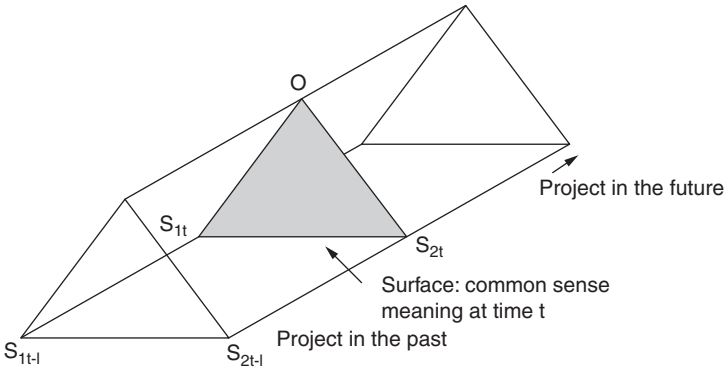


**Figure 1.1** *The Toblerone model of social representations (after Bauer and Gaskell, 1999).*

## A formal model

As interest in social representations grew through the 1990s, challenges were voiced about the vagueness of the concept – what is the precise definition of a social representation and what are the appropriate methods for studying them?

Bauer and Gaskell (1999) identify three defining characteristics of representations: the cultivation in communications systems; structured contents that serve various functions for the communications systems; and their embodiment in different modes and mediums. In social milieus, systems of communication (representations) evolve and circulate. This is referred to as the process of symbolic cultivation. Representations are embodied in one or more of four modes: habitual behaviour, individual cognition, informal communication and formal communication.

The minimal system involved in representation is the triad: two persons (subject 1 and subject 2) who share a concern with an object (O). The triangle of mediation [S-O-S] is the basic unit for the elaboration of meaning. Meaning is not an individual or private affair, but always implies the 'other'. While individually cognized, in form, function and content, the presence of the 'other' is always implicated on the basis of past social experience. To this triangle of mediation a time dimension, capturing the past and the future, is added to denote the project (P) linking the two subjects and the object. The project links S1 and S2 through mutual interests, goals and activities. Within this project the common-sense meaning of the object is an emergent property similar to a socialized form of the Lewinian life space (Lewin, 1952). The basic unit of analysis is now S-O-P-S and is depicted as a Toblerone (see Figure 1.1).

The elongated triangle, the shape of the Swiss chocolate bar, depicts the triangular relations in the context of time. In this way, a representation is a time gestalt of 'inter-objectivity'. A section through the Toblerone at any particular time is a surface that denotes the common-sense meaning (the representation) of that object at that time. The Toblerone model is at the heart of Bauer and Gaskell's (2002)

analysis of the 'biotechnology movement' – a social psychology of new technology drawing upon twenty-five years of societal assimilation and accommodation to the science of life.

A final extension of the formal model is the differentiation of social groups (wind rose model) (Bauer and Gaskell, 2008; see also Chapter 4 in this volume). Groups are not static; they evolve over time – growing, dividing and declining. Thus over time it is likely that various triangles of mediation emerge and coexist in the wider social system, characterized at different times by conflict, cooperation or indifference.

In this vein, a social system is a pack of Toblerones with O as the link between different representations – the common referent. A section through the Toblerone pack denotes the different common senses that exist in different social groups. The elongation of the triangles denotes how representations change over time. Equally, over time O may change due to its own dynamics [material process], or in response to common senses [representations].

This concept of triangles of mediation brings into focus social milieus or natural groups formed around different projects. As Moscovici (1961/1976) shows, the meaning of an object (psychoanalysis) appeared in different forms in the different French milieus. In this sense common projects, we-cognitions, collective memories and actions, define a functioning social group.

Social representations are systems of knowledge, or forms of common sense, that human subjects draw upon in order to make sense of the world around them and to act towards it in meaningful ways. Social representations, therefore, are social inasmuch as they are never idiosyncratic. If they were, they would be incomprehensible to others. According to Wagner and Hayes (2005), what marks 'social' representations is that their meaning is holomorphic, that is, for a given social group the meaning attributed to a certain object or event is consistent.

## Communication

Communication plays a critical role in the production and circulation of social representations, as ideas concerning social objects and events circulate in public and are incorporated in social representations. Chryssides and colleagues (2009) have drawn a useful distinction between 'social representation' and 'social re-presentation' to address some ambiguity concerning the term. The former refers to the content described in a social representation by which an object or event is identified as a matter of fact, object or event for a particular social group. The latter refers to a process of contestation by which newer meanings are proposed in a process of re-presentation that serves to change aspects of the content of a given social representation. The distinction is one of product and process. The latter is essentially a communicative exercise of meaning-making among members of a social group. Communication guides both the production and the evolution of social representations over time (Sammut, Tsirogianni and Wagoner, 2012).

Moscovici (1984a) has identified two processes that serve the production of new social representations. *Anchoring* refers to a process of classification by which the new and unfamiliar is placed within a familiar frame of reference. The meaning of a new object or event is thus anchored to an existing social representation. *Objectification* is a process of externalization by which the meaning of an object or event is projected in the world through images or propositions. New concepts, ideas or events can be objectified in intelligible ways for the purpose of facilitating meaning-making. For example, images of scientists inoculating tomatoes have served to objectify biotechnology and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) for certain publics (Wagner and Kronberger, 2001).

Communication thus plays a central role in the production of new social representations to make sense of new things and events that enter everyday life. It also plays a central role in how social representations circulate in public. In his study of the social representations of psychoanalysis in France, Moscovici (1961/1976) identified three communicative strategies that perpetuated the social representations of distinct groups. *Propaganda* is a centralized and ideological form of communication that perpetuates a social reality defined for a group in political terms. *Propagation* is a communicative exercise founded on belief that is dictated by a central authority. *Diffusion* is the least circumscribed communicative genre and it allows for a diversity of opinions based on scepticism and the questioning of consensus. Different groups may be more or less open to alternative constructions of the object or event in question by other individuals and groups. Consequently, they adopt characteristic patterns of communication that serve to perpetuate their own versions.

The role of communication in the perpetuation of social representations highlights two important issues that have received scholarly attention over the years. Firstly, with the integration of new ideas into existing social representations, the content and form of social representations may change over time. Central Nucleus Theory has distinguished between the *core* and *periphery* components of social representations. The core of a social representation is its central component and defines the social representation as well as its reason for existence. The peripheral component of a social representation consists of beliefs, ideas and stereotypes that serve to make the social representation relevant and applicable to a particular milieu. Peripheral ideas are amenable to change and they help in making the social representation adaptable to changing social realities (Abric, 2001; see also Chapter 6 in this volume). Sammut, Tsirogianni and Wagoner (2012) propose that communication enables social representations to evolve over time in the manner of an epidemiological time series. As such, a historical focus may make manifest the core and peripheral elements of a social representation over the course of time. In this light, understanding social representations may necessitate exploring the historical trajectory of a representational project. Through *collective remembering* the past exercises an influence on present social relations via the content available in social representations in circulation at a given historical epoch (see Chapter 10 in this volume).

This brings us to the second focal point concerning the role of communication, that is, intergroup and interpersonal relations. Duveen (2008) has argued that communicative strategies serve not only to perpetuate social representations, but also serve to forge affiliative ties among group members. He has stated that propaganda serves to develop *solidarity* between group members. Such groups come to share a political commitment and are distinguishable from out-group members who do not share the same ideology. Propagation serves in developing *communion*. Founded on belief, the social representation serves to mark out-group members, i.e. those who do not similarly believe, or those whose political ideology is incompatible with the group's beliefs. Lastly, diffusion serves in developing *sympathy*. This is characterized by the voluntary association of individuals who stand in contrast to dogmatic out-groups. One way that these affiliative bonds are put in place is through *alternative representations* (Gillespie, 2008). This term refers to that component of a social representation that describes what others who do not subscribe to the same social representation are like. Alternative representations, such as, for example, that a particular out-group may be closed-minded or ignorant, serve to put in place *semantic barriers* that limit dialogue with out-group members (Gillespie, 2008). This may often be perceived as a shortcoming in political agendas that seek reconciliation between different groups. However, such strategies remain highly effective in protecting a representation's core, ensuring its survival over time, perpetuating the affiliative bonds and social capital among group members that is already in place (Sammut, Andreouli and Sartawi, 2012), and strengthening the social identification of members with the group.

A final issue that the role of communication has put on the social representations agenda concerns socialization. Duveen and Lloyd (1990) argue that social representations are evoked in all forms of social interaction through the social identities asserted in individuals' activities. They refer to this as the *microgenetic* process of social representations (see also Chapter 8 in this volume). It occurs firstly in the ways in which individuals construct their own understanding of the situation and locate themselves and others as social actors in social relations. Secondly, in instances of discord, the negotiation of *social identities* becomes explicit and identifiable in social interaction in a microgenetic process that serves to negotiate a shared frame of reference. Social representations, according to Duveen and Lloyd, furnish the resources for such negotiation.

## New directions

Over the last fifty years the social representations approach has flourished and this has led to numerous refinements and developments in understanding myriad social-psychological phenomena. It has also attracted much criticism over thorny issues such as the role of cognition (Parker, 1987), the notion of what is shared in social representations (Verheggen and Baerveldt, 2007), the ambiguity of the