

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04200-1 - The Cambridge Handbook of Social Representations

Edited by Gordon Sammut, Eleni Andreouli, George Gaskell and Jaan Valsiner

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The Cambridge Handbook of Social Representations

A social representations approach offers an empirical utility for addressing myriad social concerns such as social order, ecological sustainability, national identity, racism, religious communities, the public understanding of science, health and social marketing. The core aspects of social representations theory have been debated over many years and some still remain widely misunderstood. This handbook provides an overview of these core aspects and brings together theoretical strands and developments in the theory, some of which have become pillars in the social sciences in their own right. Academics and students in the social sciences working with concepts and methods such as social identity, discursive psychology, positioning theory, semiotics, attitudes, risk perception and social values will find this an invaluable resource.

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Preface

This handbook aims to take stock and to look forward at key theoretical, methodological and applied desiderata of the theory of social representations. It is designed to appeal to psychologists and social theorists, as well as scholars and students working in cognate disciplines including cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, political science, philosophy, communication studies and linguistics whose interests focus on the ordinary knowledge in the life-world.

In 1968 Gordon Allport wrote:

the modern social psychologist is haunted by the question: How can the individual be both a cause and a consequence of society. How can his nature depend indisputably upon the prior existence of cultural designs and upon his role in a pre-determined social structure, while at the same time he is clearly a unique person, both selecting and rejecting influences from his cultural surroundings, and in turn creating new cultural forms for the guidance of future generations? (Allport, 1968, p. 8)

Towards the end of ‘The historical background of modern social psychology’, Allport sets out the challenge for social psychology: the burning issues of war and peace, education, population control and effective democracy, are all in need of assistance. But he suggests that such assistance is unlikely to come from ‘small gem-like researches, however exquisite their perfection’. Will, he asks, the current preoccupation with methods and miniature models lead to theory and application? He goes on: ‘integrative theories are not easy to come by: like all behavioural science social psychology rests ultimately upon broad meta-theories concerning the nature of man and the nature of society’. Allport contrasts the ‘high level conceptualisations’ of the likes of Machiavelli, Bentham and Comte with the contemporary non-theoretical orientation of the empiricists. He hoped that the tide might turn (Allport, 1968, p. 69).

The turning of the tide is evidenced in this handbook, which brings together forty authors whose research is inspired by the theory of social representations. This theory traces its origins back to Durkheim’s notion of collective representations. Since its inception in Moscovici’s (1961/1976) writings, it has adopted a societal level of explanation to account for the fact that human behaviour, however assessed from the outside, is sensible within a cultural context that validates and legitimates such behaviour. The theory of social representations has thus served to advance the sociocultural agenda by highlighting how human behaviour is sensible within the

context of its production. Consequently, it has provided sociocultural theorists with a framework for studying and understanding sense-making processes in different sociocultural contexts.

The theory of social representations has come to stand as the foremost psychological theory for the study of common sense. Over the past fifty years it has stimulated much research that has addressed these concerns and charted its implications on varied psychological behaviour such as communication (Moscovici, 1961/1976), social cohesion (Duveen, 2008), social cognition (Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue, 2005), identity (Moloney and Walker, 2007), dialogicality (Marková, 2003), discourse (Wagner and Hayes, 2005), and others. And while much sociocultural research draws inspiration from the theory of social representations, publications in the field remain dispersed in innumerable journals and volumes that have researched these concerns and advanced our understanding of psychological phenomena in their context of production.

The theory of social representations takes a societal or sociocultural perspective. Sociocultural characteristics have featured in the psychology agenda since the beginnings of the discipline. Indeed, Wundt's (1916) concern with 'folk psychology' balanced the remit of study for the discipline by including concerns with mental events that originate in community life alongside concerns with physiology and the biological basis of human behaviour. Wundt thus included within psychology's remit concerns with language and cognate phenomena such as customs, religion, myth and magic (Farr, 1996). The quest for understanding human behaviour in its situational and cultural contingencies is, therefore, not new. However, in recent years the discipline has witnessed a concerted effort on the part of sociocultural psychologists who have sought to emphasize the fact that environmental, social and cultural conditions constitute an invariable condition for the very existence of psychological phenomena (Valsiner and Rosa, 2007; Valsiner, 2012).

In essence, human behaviour differs widely across behavioural conditions. The fact of individual differences in behavioural outcomes is well known and has received considerable scholarly attention. In response to a similar stimulus, an individual may respond in a certain way while another individual may respond in a totally different manner due to their personal inclinations. Human behaviour, however, differs even more widely than this. It differs due to social and cultural conditions that determine how a thing is perceived (Moscovici, 1984b), what construal of that thing is brought to bear in describing and understanding that behaviour (Ross and Nisbett, 1991), and what repertoire of behavioural outcomes is plausible and legitimate as a course of action for that individual in a given society (Wagner and Hayes, 2005). In this complex determination of behaviour, social and cultural conditions characterize psychological phenomena. Sociocultural psychology has drawn our attention to the fact that social and cultural conditions give rise to particular psychological phenomena that manifest within contexts which shape their emergence as well as ontogenetic progression. Understanding human behaviour in its manifold complexity, therefore, requires more than an appreciation of individual differences. It further requires sensitivity to those

extra-individual conditions that also determine behavioural outcomes. A consequence of this added focus is that assumptions of universality and standardization across cultural conditions are challenged. Sociocultural differences require a particular and specific focus on cultural elements that give rise to intercultural differences in the manifestation of psychological phenomena.

This handbook brings together various theoretical strands and developments that have emerged from the theory of social representations, some of which have become pillars in social psychology in their own right and have stimulated further inquiry in their turn. It also extends the social scientific agenda beyond that of the theory of social representations and into equally relevant concepts and domains of inquiry such as social identity, discursive psychology, positioning theory, semiotics and others.

The chapters provide an overview of the core aspects of the theory that have been debated over the years, some of which remain widely misunderstood, and provide an up-to-date account of developments such that further productive inquiry can be stimulated. Finally, the handbook will serve as an invaluable tool in the teaching of the theory of social representations. The theory has gained popularity over the years and routinely features in both undergraduate and postgraduate social psychology curricula in many countries. This handbook matches theoretical aspirations with real-world empirical concerns of interest to those of a sociocultural persuasion.

The handbook is divided into four parts. The first part, ‘Foundations’, deals with foundational issues and with the core concepts and debates within social representations theory. The second part, ‘Conceptual developments’, elaborates further notions and concepts that have become part of the social representations approach to sociocultural psychology. The third part, ‘New directions’, reviews some of the major social psychological theories that have furthered the theory of social representations and advanced the sociocultural agenda. The final part, ‘Applications’, presents empirical studies that have been undertaken in diverse fields and which demonstrate the breadth of application and the utility of a social representations approach.

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