The ‘phenomenon of social representations’: A comment on Potter & Litton

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Moscovici’s various presentations (e.g. 1973, 1981, 1982, 1983) of ‘The phenomenon of social representations’ (1984) invite critical comment, partly due to an explicit emphasis on the retention of vagueness in this approach (cf. Moscovici, 1983). Such vagueness may be a deliberate research policy intended to invite constructive comment and it is in this spirit that I would like to address some of the critical points raised by Potter & Litton (1985) in their interesting assessment of some aspects of Moscovici’s work.

First of all, I would like to comment on two specific issues that Potter & Litton raise. These concern the treatment of representations as coextensive with social groups and the notion of consensus across representations, both of which, in my view, derive from a source of ambiguity different to the one identified by the authors. This ambiguity arises from (i) Moscovici’s aim of shifting the level of social-psychological analysis from its predominant focus on the individual, and (ii) from the nature of the processes such as anchoring and objectification that he postulates, which do not appear to be consistent with such an aim.

In rejecting the prevalent social-psychological metaphor, i.e. the information-processing one, Moscovici also rejects the distinction between content and process (cf. Moscovici, 1982, pp. 143–144) in an attempt to shift the level of analysis in social psychology from the individual to the ‘collective’ (cf. Moscovici, 1982, p. 140). However, the absence of any theoretical supposition or conceptual armoury with which to link the products of a ‘thinking society’ to the social-psychological processes involved in the production and reproduction of social representations leads to the difficulties pointed out by Potter & Litton. These concern the interpretation of social groups as fundamental analytic units, and the level at which social representations are shared, and are particularly evident in empirical realizations of the approach. The various social-psychological processes proposed by Moscovici do not pave the way for a conceptualization of the social processes involved in the production, reproduction and mediation of social representations.

If the emerging approach of social representations is to avoid a reductionist–cognitivist approach, and thereby fulfill Moscovici’s own requirements, then some specification of the interface between social representations as the products of symbolic mediation processes which are realized in social interaction and those social-psychological processes involved in social interaction needs to be made. Such processes would have to advance a conceptualization of joint symbolic interaction, namely the coordination of social action through reference to pre-established symbolic media (e.g. language) and the dialectic that is involved in their reproduction and transformation. The ‘processes’ in the present formulations of social representations (e.g. objectification, anchoring) can be readily subsumed under a cognitive social psychology which employs the information-processing metaphor, mainly because the various process postulates are ambiguous with respect to the level at which they may be interpreted. Although my points of departure for critique differ from those of Potter & Litton, our views converge with regard to the end-product, namely, the empirical realizations of the work. Much of the research employing the ‘notion’ of social representations does not amount to an alternative to the dominant mode of social psychology, either conceptually or empirically (cf. Abric, 1984; Codol, 1984; Flamant, 1984). There is also ambiguity in its conceptualization of the ‘group’, ‘consensus’, etc., as Potter & Litton point out. This is not to question the quality or the value of the work, but rather to
suggest that the present focus on the 'phenomenon of social representations' has as yet not involved a shift in the nature of epistemic objects in social psychology.

Where I would like to distance myself from Potter & Litton's critique is the point at which they request some specification '...the particular level of consensus' and note that 'for this purpose a discussion of degrees of consensus is required'. They go on to suggest that the nature of the categories involved should be identified in terms of their psychological reality to subjects. I do not think that their proposition of identifying linguistic repertoires and features of linguistic usage provides a way forwards. Such a proposition, in my view, fails to meet Moscovici's point about the dynamic nature of social representations as phenomena. Potter & Litton's attempt to provide this dynamic through resorting to the problem of indexicality (they distinguish between mention, use in theory, and use in practice) does not, in my view, resolve the problem. The distinction they introduce merely points out the contextual specificity of meanings and, as such, constitutes the identification of a problem, rather than a theoretical or practical solution to it. Furthermore, the indexicality problem is not specific to the research they single out. Although in agreement with their diagnosis, I think that the problems contained in social representations work arise because the conceptual elaboration that is necessary for a genuine shift of the level of analysis from the individual to the collective is such a major undertaking.

With regard to non-experimental work on social representations (cf. Farr & Moscovici, 1984) I would like to note the following. To the extent that the 'phenomenon' remains unspecific with regard to the social-psychological processes which are involved in the production and reproduction of social representations, it will not be an advance on a type of social anthropology which has been extant for many years. This rich tradition began with Malinowski, and the classic example is the work of Evans-Pritchard. Although a descriptive account of social content is admittedly interesting in its own right, going beyond this is essential in making the 'phenomenon of social representations' into a 'theory of social representations'. Thus, although in broad agreement with Potter & Litton's critique, I do not think that their treatment of the problem enables the analytic advance that one should expect from a social-psychological theory. Furthermore, their analysis, which is chiefly mediated by language and meaning shift phenomena, does not invite the integration of social-psychological processes in a non-reductionist social psychology. This is one of Moscovici's aims, and it is one towards which I feel very sympathetic.

References


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