

## ***THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY (SRT) FOR GENDER EQUITABLE RESEARCH***

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### Abstract

Strongly rooted in the sociological tradition of social psychology, Social Representations Theory (SRT) has been developing since the sixties as a useful theoretical and practical multidisciplinary social research tool, particularly in European and Latin American contexts. However, since the end of the nineties, and following the consolidation of Social Representations Theory, there has been an important effort to bridge this perspective with other important contemporary critical theories given its emphasis on the way in which social subjects, groups and society as a whole construct and transform meaning rooted in pre-existing knowledge and everyday experience. One of the most prolific and promising exchanges has been established between Social Representations Theory and gender equitable research. This article revises the premises of SRT in order to suggest its relevance for and linkages with diverse studies rooted in a gender perspective with a clear equity goal.

*Key words:* Social representations, gender perspective, feminist theory, epistemology

## ***EL POTENCIAL DE LA TEORÍA DE REPRESENTACIONES SOCIALES (TRS) PARA LA INVESTIGACIÓN CON PERSPECTIVA DE EQUIDAD DE GÉNERO***

### Resumen

Fuertemente anclado en la tradición sociológica de la psicología social, la Teoría de Representaciones Sociales (TRS) se ha desarrollado desde los años sesenta como una perspectiva multidisciplinaria especialmente útil en contextos de investigación europeos y latinoamericanos. Empero, desde finales de los años noventa, una vez consolidada la Teoría de Representaciones Sociales, ha habido un esfuerzo importante por vincularse con otras teorías críticas contemporáneas dado su énfasis en la forma en que las y los sujetos sociales, grupos y la sociedad en general construyen y transforman el conocimiento con base en el conocimiento pre-existente y su experiencia cotidiana. Uno de los intercambios más prolíficos y promisorios se ha establecido entre la Teoría de Representaciones Sociales y la investigación con perspectiva de equidad de género. El presente artículo presenta las premisas básicas de la Teoría de Representaciones Sociales con el fin de asentar su relevancia y conexiones con estudios varios desde la perspectiva de género con una visión de equidad.

*Palabras clave:* Representaciones sociales, perspectiva de género, teoría feminista, epistemología

## ***O POTENCIAL DA TEORIA DE REPRESENTAÇÕES SOCIAIS (TRS) PARA A PESQUISA COM PERSPECTIVA DE EQUIDADE DE GÊNERO***

### Resumo

Fortemente ancorado na tradição sociológica da psicologia social, a Teoria de Representações Sociais (TRS) se desenvolveu desde os anos sessenta como uma perspectiva multidisciplinar especialmente útil em contextos de pesquisa europeus e latino-americanos. Mas, desde o final dos anos noventa, uma vez consolidada a Teoria de Representações Sociais, tem havido um esforço importante por vincular-se com outras teorias críticas contemporâneas dado sua ênfase na forma em que os sujeitos

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sociais, grupos e a sociedade em geral constroem e transforma o conhecimento com base no conhecimento pré-existente e sua experiência cotidiana. Um dos intercâmbios mais prolíficos e promissores estabeleceu-se entre a Teoria de Representações Sociais e a pesquisa com perspectiva de equidade de gênero. O presente artigo apresenta as premissas básicas da Teoria de Representações Sociais com o objetivo de assentar sua relevância e conexões com vários estudos desde a perspectiva de gênero com uma visão equidade.

*Palavras chave:* Representações sociais, perspectiva de gênero, teoria feminista, epistemologia.

## INTRODUCTION

Strongly rooted in the sociological tradition of social psychology, Social Representations Theory (SRT) has been developing since the sixties as a useful theoretical and practical multidisciplinary social research tool, particularly in European and Latin American contexts. However, since the end of the nineties, and following the consolidation of Social Representations Theory, there has been an important effort to bridge this perspective with other important contemporary critical theories given its emphasis on the way in which social subjects, groups and society as a whole construct and transform meaning rooted in pre-existing knowledge and everyday experience. A most prolific and promising exchange may be –and has started to formally be– established between Social Representations Theory, feminist and gender equitable research. This article revises the central premises of SRT in order to suggest its potential, relevance for, and linkages with diverse studies rooted in a gender perspective with a clear equity goal.

Thus, the article unfolds in six interconnected sections that structure the overall argument. Following this *Introduction*, comes a section which presents the *Theory of Social Representations: An Introduction*, which leads to a discussion of *What a Social Representation is*, followed by a section on *Epistemology and Social Representation*, and one addressing the *Functions of Social Representations and the link of Social Representations, Identity and Gender*. Finally, the core points of the reflections guiding the article which link the potential fruits of the exchange between Social Representations Theory and gender equitable research in the context of the broader analytical, critical and transformative goal of the social sciences are discussed.

### *Social Representations Theory: An Introduction*

Although strongly rooted in the sociological European tradition of social psychology, the Theory of Social Representations (SRT) is multidisciplinary from its origins as it directly draws from psychology, sociology and anthropology. SRT develops following a critique to positivism and to the individualist-collectivist juxtaposition, i.e., to individualizing and reductionist perspectives, as well as those that advocated the collective as totalizing. In the post-war years, the boom of individual psychology in North America saw

the consolidation of the behaviourist tradition represented by Gordon Willard Allport, although it also led to an opposing social constructionism trend (Farr, 1996). Initially, both had a tendency towards anonymous generalization, taking social subjects as impersonal, partial, fragmented, undifferentiated and devalued objects of study. Instead, the richness of SRT's perspective was to put forward a third way that gave primacy to social thought however addressing the processes through which individual and collective histories interrelate (Moscovici, 1976, 2000; Farr & Moscovici, 1984). Besides, social subjects came to be seen as agents, female and male social agents and groups producing and transforming specific knowledge and practices, culture and history processually.

Social Representations Theory initially developed in France in the sixties, following Serge Moscovici's work *La psychanalyse, son image et son public* (1961 [1976]). In this study, the author researched the way in which diverse groups built their specific knowledge relating to a same 'scientific' topic, according to their particular context, modes of thought and ideologies. So, Moscovici looked at the different representations of psychoanalysis held by the French Communist Party, the Catholic Church and the liberal press. The importance of this study, revised in 1976 and which has already become a social science classic was the ability of the author to question the individualistic and laboratory experimental psychology at micro level at the time, suggesting its links to other societal social sciences. However, the alternative was not to reproduce the functionalist Durkheimian notion of 'collective representation' that would subsume the individual either. Instead, he sought to articulate a theory that accounted both for social structure as well as for the processes whereby the social subject constantly generates, interprets, and transforms knowledge inter-subjectively. Unlike the Marxist conception of ideology as false consciousness, or the Durkheimian conception of passive social subjects paralyzed in the face of 'social facts' and social control, Moscovici explored the ways through which social groups are structured and act according to different yet shared social representations, enabling them to perceive, give sense and transform them, appropriating and gestating knowledge, communicating and becoming active minorities inserted by not only determined by power structures (the social change conception).

In this view, conflict and tension in the social sphere are addressed positively, as motors of change and not of crises, a process of innovation that is normalized as well as questioned given representational activity (Arruda, 1998, 2010).

#### *What is a Social Representation?*

At this point, it becomes important to clearly note that a social representation is constructed in culture and it is not a psychological or a cognitive individual construct. Social representations are social products derived from interaction and their nature is relational. It is impossible to find an isolated social representation; it always develops, circulates and is transformed in relation to other social representations. Besides, social representations do not constitute reality as such; they are an approximation to it. Reality cannot only be seen as a social construction, as it cannot be apprehended if it is not through inter-subjective processes in which the 'natural' world becomes known and is represented (Jovtchelovitch, 2007 [2001], 2007 [2002]). Social subjects re-present reality, which is to say that they do not merely reproduce it mechanically as a mirror; they interpret and transform it and at the same time are transformed by it. This has direct implications for social scientific and gender equitable research given that representation processes are directly linked to the processes of conformation, maintenance and transformation of social and collective identities. The multi-level identity approach includes relations within individuals, between in-groups and out-groups, as well as historical, societal and ideological processes, including deeply embedded representations of gender such as world outlooks and other that are more flexible and less resistant to change.

In social sciences the general concept 'representation' has become a 'meta-notion' that "designates any content unconditionally applicable to any content or situation" (Herzlich, 1991 in Torres López, 2002, 39). However, since its inception, the notion of social representations addressed a particular type of knowledge and of social subject: common sense knowledge related with everyday experience and shared by *any* social subject regardless of age, race, gender, status and particular context (without overlooking the way in which specific contexts and constructs impact on subjects' representations). Beyond specialized and technical knowledge, Moscovici emphasized the importance of common sense (*sensus communis*) as the symbolic capital from which all knowledge is historically constructed, rooted and transformed. This knowledge is not legitimated by its scientific testability, but following from its contextual and everyday usage. Herein resides the importance of lived experience in social representation studies that is also so important for feminism (see Flores & Wagner, 2011).

According to Jodelet "for the subject, things are not defined by their physical properties but by their lived aspects, with their value and action components. Things are not 'for the subject', except for the perception that she or he has of them, given the sense that they have for her or his concrete life..." (2004, 97).

Social representations are systems of ideas, values and practices with a dual function: i) to establish a framework of order to guiding social subjects in the symbolic and material world they inhabit, and ii) to enable communication between the members of a collectivity through a shared code to name and classify objects and processes. According to Moscovici "social representations are 'systems of values, ideas and practices' that simultaneously 'establish an order that enables individuals to become familiar with and be part of the social and material world' and at the same time 'enables communication between members of a community providing them with a shared social exchange code which names and classifies various aspects of the world and their personal or group history without ambiguity'" (cited in Herzlich & Graham, 1973, preface, xiii).

Social representations originate in everyday life, "society is a thinking system and they [SRs] can be seen as the contemporary equivalent of myths and belief systems in primitive societies" (Moscovici, 1981, 181 cited in Augoustinos & Walker, 1996). They emerge both from common sense and also from scientific knowledge in modern societies, and although they seem contradictory, this is because social representations explain social reality in its distinct levels of complexity. They are consensual (shared) and dynamic (they exist in a constant transformation process). Thus, social representations go way beyond ways of thinking the world, they are ways of making the world (Moscovici, 1988), of symbolically and collectively making sense and being part of change, of incorporating new phenomena (Wagner & Kronberger, in Philogène & Deaux, 2001), as well as of re-constructing the past from the present in the face of future agency (Mead, 1932). Moscovici speaks of SRT as a way of making anthropology of modern life (1993). The study of social representations focuses on the ways in which knowledge is built, especially everyday knowledge. It is thus that SRT has important links with the processes through which social subjects and group identities are forged; through social representations that are shared and distinguish groups and group members, representations express particular cultural codes. Besides, representations have a direct relation to action- setting its norms and making it possible. According to the definition provided by Jodelet (1988, 474-5):

"The concept of social representation designates a specific form of knowledge, common sense knowledge;

its contents manifest the operation of genitive and functional processes that are socially characterized. In a greater sense, it designates a form of social thought. Social representations constitute ways of practical thought oriented to communication, comprehension and dominion of the social, material and ideal environment. As such, they present specific characteristics in terms of contents, mental operation and logic.

Social characterization of contents or of representation processes must be referred to the conditions and the contexts where representation emerge, to communication that makes them circulate and to the functions that they serve as part of the interaction with the world and with others”.

Given that SRs exist in the minds of individuals, they are understood as socio-cognitive constructions, as they have both a social and a cognitive component. However, given that they gestate in a given cultural context –which they conform– social representations go beyond being mental structures, they possibilitate and frame communication at its base. Abric describes this relation, “a representation is not a mere reflection of reality; rather, it is its significant organisation. This signification depends as much on contingent factors –the nature and limits of a situation, its immediate context, the finality of a situation– as well as on more general factors that transcend the situation as such: [that is to say] the social and ideological context, the place of individuals in social organization, individual and group history, what is socially at stake, as well as systems of values (Abric cited in Philogène & Deaux, 2001, 43).

Culture organises, transforms and perpetuates world experiences, framing identity as ‘social being’ in the development of the ‘mind’ (Goetz, 1972). Cognition is social by definition, it develops in social interaction. Culture constitutes its framework; it makes the formation and dissemination of SRs possible, as well as of their continuous transformation. ‘Social cognition’ implies shared representations, emerging from social systems and group relations, as well as from mental operations such as learning, interpreting, thinking, making arguments and inferences, etc (Farr & Moscovici, 1984; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Wyer & Srull, 1984). Thus, studying social representations enables us to have access to and make visible the components of culture and its relation to gender. For example, according to G. Duveen “identity, then, is not a thing like an attitude or a particular belief. It is the force or power that links a person or group to the attitude or belief, in a word, to the representation” (Duveen, in Philogène & Deaux, 2001, 268). So, even if representations inhabit the mind, they are constituted in the world of cultural matrixes where thought emerges as such, in a relation that cannot arbitrarily separate the subject from the

representational object nor the researcher and her/his position with the study of representations. In this sense social representations have two basic functions: i) *categorizing*: they make-up and become standard cognitive models of everyday life (of objects, people, facts, actions, and quotidian events); and ii) *prescribing*: as cognitive models they are part of our stock of existing cognitive models which structure and equilibrate novel experiences and emerging knowledge. Thus, SRs link the past with the present and allow for future justification *a posteriori*.

So we may say that social representations precede identities –not in the Durkheimian sense– but in that *in fieri* they are the base contents from which the world and auto and hetero-normative identities are constructed throughout life in agentic processes of socialization, identification, familiarization or internationalization (identitary function of social representations). Besides, social representations make communication possible, they enable us to assimilate and be part of change, as they constitute the symbolic or shared signified space that the sociogenetic vision of relational systemic processes puts forward at different levels, “individuals position themselves within groups at the same time as groups position themselves within the cultural space” (Deaux, in Philogène & Deaux, 2001, 316). Besides, whilst establishing meaning structures, representations have a power function as they “condition human existence” (Arendt, 1998 [1958]), institutionalizing knowledge, common sense, local capacities and thus they norm action.

#### *Epistemology and social representations*

The relational outlook in SRT breaks with the subject-object/ subjectivism-structuralism divide given that “an object does not exist by itself; it only exists for an individual or group and in relation to them. Thus, the subject-object relation determines the object itself. A representation is always the representation of something to somebody” (Giménez, 2005, 407). A representation always has a relational and social character; it is historically rooted without falling prey to a rigid determinism, as re-presentation it is a process, and its working mechanism is dynamic as we shall see. According to this critical perspective, the social subject is seen as situated and agentic, and research is also not neutral (for example in relation to gender). The researcher situates her or himself before the studied object, breaking the duality imposed by positive science (e.g., standpoint feminist theory following Sandra Harding).

The social subject put forward by SRT is: 1) active and autonomous in relation to the object(s) s/he ‘represents’ throughout history (this spatial and temporal relation has been graphed as ‘Toblerone Model’; Bauer & Gaskell, 1999); 2) relationally conforming her or his identity at individual and

group level; 3) possessing an ontological value in diversity which in turn validates her or his experience its derived product, namely knowledge; 4) inhabits shared universes instead of reified ones (ideology seen as deeply rooted world outlooks and not as false consciousness); 5) is not only the male social subject of traditional scientific elites; it is any female or male social subject whose knowledge and knowledge processes must be ontologically taken as valid and epistemologically addressed from a broad optic (this also includes other axes of inequality: age, ethnicity, class, status, education, race, etc). 6) Besides, this model rearticulates the asymmetric dual subject-object (subject) research relation, inviting both to define their standpoint. 7) Finally, it also includes preferences, affective and emotional processes (Banchs, 2000) and lived experience (Jodelet, 2004).

There are two basic processes of historical production of knowledge: anchoring and objectification. It is through these two processes that the unfamiliar becomes familiar, and that new concepts and ideas are assimilated into pre-existing knowledge, in the contextual framework of existing world outlooks. Anchoring is the process through which an object is assigned meaning as it is associated to other symbols. Objectification implies linking existing with emerging knowledge; it is the exercise of translating something unfamiliar into something concrete. It takes place symbolically through metaphors and analogies or materially, linked to objects and entities.

It is through these two processes –anchoring and objectification– that social representations fulfil their dual role “a) they make *conventional* the objects, people and events we face. SRs given them a defined form, locating them into existing categories and gradually establishing them as specific, unique and shared models; and b) they are *prescriptive*, i.e., they impose upon us with an irresistible force. This force is a combination of a pre-existing structure that is there even before we start to think, as well as of a tradition that decrees *what* it is that we should think” (Moscovici, italics in original, 2000, 22-23).

#### *Functions of social representations & the link of social representations, identity and gender*

Besides the basic processes of anchoring and objectification, as well as having reviewed the structure of SRs, it is also necessary to outline the functions of SRs, in order to expose how they are a useful and complete research tool with regards to specific research objects and gender constructions in a given society. This is particularly relevant for gender equitable research, as it explicitly makes the link between SRs and identity. SRT established links between subject and representational object, between the self and

identity, identity and the representational contents that inform it and guide its practices, between different levels of identity ranging from the individual to the collective, between interaction and communication, thought and action, contents and processes, tradition and change, individuality and ideology as system. According to Jean-Claude Abric “the representation works as a system of representation of reality that rules the relations of individuals with their physical and social environment, determining behaviour and practices. It is a *guide for action*, orienting actions and social relations. It is a pre-codified system of reality given that it determines a set of *anticipations* and *expectations* (Abric, 1994, 13, emphasis in original).

Representations are useful in order to describe, classify and explain reality (see Álvarez Bermúdez in Romero Rodríguez, 2004, 45-46). The four basic functions of social representations are: 1- function of *knowing*: permits understanding and communication. Social representations enable us to understand and explain reality, i.e., to acquire new information and knowledge and integrate it in an understandable framework. This representational framework makes communication possible, where common sense gestates, is disseminated and transforms knowledge; 2- *orientation* function: guide behaviour and practices. Social representations are a guide for action, defining a situation and its objective, working as a system of anticipations and expectations, as well as determining behaviours that guide social subjects; 3- legitimation or *justification* function: makes it possible for social subjects to justify their postures and behaviours *a posteriori*; and 4- *identity* functions: defining identity as a social process that delimits and defines group identity and specificity (Abric, 94, 15-17; Banchs, 2000; Jodelet, 1989).

From social representations individuals and groups are situated in the social field, the detraditionalised public sphere (Jovchelovitch, 2007), which makes socialization processes possible (Duveen, 1997, 2001; Duveen & Lloyd, 1986, 1990; Lloyd & Duveen, 1992), as well as social comparison and esteem (Howarth, 2002 a, b). It is at this level that intergroup processes have been typically researched. However, from a deep ethnographic and systemic perspective, a specific topic, place and historical period may be researched (e.g. Jodelet, 1989), looking at the ways in which social representations define the elements that conform specific identities, the ways in which they are part of culture, and how they configure specific gender identities (See Flores, 2001; Serrano, 2010).

At this point, it is also important to make explicit the dialectic relation between existing and emerging social representations in social change dynamics seen from the Hegelian historical paradigm (Marková, 1982) just as the novel is integrated into existing representations and

knowledge, existing knowledge is transformed in the lights of its relation to the novel, in such a way that reality is constantly re-presented and this tension of consensus and contestation reinforces and transforms knowledge.

## DISCUSSION

Gender, as well as an analytical concept to distinguish the cultural construction of sex and a methodological research category, is a research perspective, a particular and indispensable lens deriving from feminism and feminist political theory committed to the goal of equity for all human beings. In science and politics, there is a recurrent bias of equating gender to women, often assuming that addressing women's issues marginally—either statistically or rhetorically—means being gender sensitive. Adopting a gender perspective implies looking at the ways in which the social construction of sexual difference specifically impacts on social subjects, their identities, experience, life conditions and power relations. It means questioning the universalising male-female dyad and looking at specific subjects, groups and cultures. This same applies to social scientific research, using gender as concept and category to collect and organise data does not have the same explanatory and transformative potential as adopting a gender perspective in research. Considering social representations as research framework in the social sciences is highly fruitful when conducting research with a gender perspective as shall be discussed.

The classical subject-object divide in functionalist psychological and social science studies has tended to perpetuate and justify roles and attitudes at the root of differentiation explanations, institutionalising models of 'normality', which seen as natural and consensual, impact in the construction of power relations and equity (Flores, 2009). In this sense, looking at 'gendered' reality from the perspective of social representations, we become aware of the processes of knowledge construction and the functions of social representations, and it is there where we see the dual tension of knowledge as *pre-established* and knowledge *in the making*, which enables us to think of the processes through which social reality and meaning is constructed, re-constructed and may be de-constructed, with the aim of more equitable gendered social representations and research.

Gender is one of the first forms of social identity that children acquire and legitimise through their life and learning experience. Through gendered social representations social subjects establish a frame of order to understand reality and position themselves and live within the signified social world. Looking at mechanisms through which knowledge has been institutionalised and naturalised through

social representations within societies and cultures (religion, ideology, science, world outlooks and cosmovisions) enables us as social scientists to identify and make visible the components of gender systems in cultures so that they are not seen as inevitable and to find ways of transforming them. Historically rooted, by system is meant "the totality of ideological elements, thoughts, beliefs, values and norms that constitute social relations through which communication becomes dynamic, representing a certain complexity when analysing a social representation" (Flores, 2010, 368).

In the present case, we are interested in gender systems as such and at gender components in other representational systems. Gender systems do not exist separate from the social practices of its individuals and groups, and they are linked to the meanings that both sustain and are central in transforming them. These shared systems of meaning and practices do not operate in a vacuum, they operate and are transformed through meaningful human relations, taking place with important power differentials. Here, the potential is to explore what are the specific meanings linked to the gender system(s); how do social subjects make sense of these meanings and translate them into their personal identity; how do social subjects and groups make sense of the identity of others; what happens in terms of inter-personal and intra-/inter- group relations; how are social representations linked to individual and collective life experiences; and how to naturalise, resist and transform existing knowledge and practices in order to forge a more just and equitable society, taking into account that this process is rooted in existing unfair and inequitable meanings, representations and practice gendered systems that are historically at the base of science and prevalent world outlooks.

Although in order to do this it is important to focus on specific case studies or from a gender equitable research perspective, the importance of suggesting the usefulness of incorporating the Theory of Social Representations and outlining briefly its main premises has been the main goal of the present article. Instead of focusing on objectivity and neutrality, SRT and research with a gender equity goal take a particular research stand and position before the object (increasingly agentic subjects) of research; they see the knowledge generation process as direct, shared and dialogical (not hierarchically top-down or juxtaposed bottom-up); they look at particular contexts and power relations as they unfold across space and time (historicity and process); space is taken to be symbolic and material in its interrelation (overcoming the structural-idealist divide); both address a multiplicity of levels systemically, from the micro to the macro, intra-individual to societal an ideological dimensions; affective dimensions and experience are considered central in knowledge, change and meaning transformation systems;

knowledge and change are seen as directly accessible to all and not at a merely abstract or expert level (democratization of knowledge); a variety of elements, meaning and practices are accounted for in their interrelation (not only hegemonic, dualistic or fragmentary stances); knowledge is linked to action and action to knowledge (addressing the theory-practice gap), amongst others. All of this is directly linked to the critical and transformative potential and commitment of the social sciences.

Besides, it is important to note that social representations theory (SRT) and gender equitable research originally deriving from feminism emerged given their critical stance, they share similar premises and goals, have a common history in terms of the particular political context and dates of their consolidation, they have a theoretical as well as a practical and multi-methodological orientation, both have consolidated by now and it is clear that nowadays they have many lessons to share in order to enrich each other in the near future. Deepening this relation, especially in practical cases that may give us greater lights as to their mutually fecundating potential across diverse disciplines in the social sciences is the challenge ahead.

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