

Social Representations: A conceptual critique

ANDREW MCKINLAY
and JONATHAN POTTER

INTRODUCTION¹

Moscovici's theory of social representations² has attracted considerable interest among social psychologists, as well as stimulating a growing body of research (Di Giacomo, 1980; Herzlich, 1978; Hewstone et al., 1982; Barjonet, 1980). Elsewhere, problems have been identified in the way the theory is operationalised in empirical studies, with the vague and over-general notion of consensus it utilises and with its failure satisfactorily to conceptualise the role of discourse; (Litton & Potter, 1985, Parker, 1987; Potter & Litton, 1985; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter, Wetherell & McKinlay, 1987). In this paper, we will be concerned solely with the conceptual coherence of the theory itself. Moscovici's goal is to forge a perspective which resists the individualistic reductionism common elsewhere in social psychology and improves on previous theoretical constructs such as attitudes and opinions. We will argue that this goal is blocked by a number of basic conceptual flaws in the theory, and that these flaws may explain some of the difficulties which occur when it is operationalised.

Moscovici reports that the term 'social representation' can be traced back to Durkheim's concept of collective representations³ and he offers a variety of examples to illustrate its use. These include popular conceptions of scientific theories, such as the layman's notion of neurosis (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 111), traditional beliefs such as religious or superstitious beliefs (Moscovici, 1983, p. 135), commonly employed explanations of the world such as talk of the 'class struggle' (Moscovici, 1984) and popular ideas on social features such as racial differences (Hewstone & Moscovici, 1983; Moscovici, 1976). The most famous example is, of course, his study of the pared-down version(s) of psychoanalysis widely used in France during the 1950s (Moscovici, 1961). However he is less willing to provide a precise definition of 'social representation' (Moscovici,

1984a, p. 957) and, on occasions, even treats its vagueness as a virtue (Moscovici, 1985 p.91).

Nevertheless, it is possible to glean from Moscovici's writings a partial list of definitional criteria, although this is a difficult task in that Moscovici's comments on the matter are, often, fragmentary and are, sometimes, contradictory. The first goal of this paper is to collate these diverse comments, thereby providing a coherent picture of the social representations theory.⁴

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: THE THEORY

Structure, content and function

At the most general level, Moscovici describes social representations as mental phenomena (or processes) having both structure, or form, and content⁵ and occupying a curious position between understanding-type concepts and perceptions (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 17). Their structure is complex in that representations typically comprise both abstract elements and pictorial elements. The abstract property of a social representation is, in most cases, outweighed by its pictorial side, as most social representations centre on a *figurative* nucleus. (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 38) A social representation, then, takes the form of a set of concepts and linguistic elements which are either abstract or pictorial – a combination in which the pictorial dominates, in most cases.

As is obvious from the list of examples given by Moscovici, the *content* of social representations varies extensively. What can be said, though, is that this content typically includes both cognitive and affective aspects. Furthermore all representations have a common mode of derivation, stemming either from the dissemination of a scientific theory or from other social representations or from inter-individual communication. The intrinsic linkage of social representations to communication is important for two reasons:

(1) It underpins the *social* nature of social representations and their contents:

The word 'social' was meant to indicate that representations are the outcome of an unceasing babble and a permanent dialogue between individuals. Representations adapt to the flow of interactions between social groups. . . . (Moscovici, 1984a, p. 950).

Thus it is part of the essential nature of social representations that they

are dependent on actual instances of inter-individual communication: in part, social representations grow out of the discussions people pursue in making sense of their social lives.

(2) The linkage between social representations and inter-individual communication provides a dynamic for the contents of social representations:

What is most striking to the contemporary observer is (social representations') mobile and circulating character; in short their plasticity. We see them, more, as dynamic structures, operating on an assembly of relations and of behaviours which appear, and disappear, together with those of the representations. (Moscovici 1984b, p. 18.)

As the nature of representations is dependent on their actual use in everyday talk, their content will be continuously changing as individuals employ them in new contexts.

Social representations are therefore complex mental entities which have both abstract and pictorial elements. They derive from inter-individual communication and so are essentially social (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 13). This social aspect ensures that social representations, unlike, in Moscovici's view, other social psychological constructs such as schemata or tacit knowledge systems, can never be static entities, for they are continuously modified by the pressure of use.

The social nature of social representations has implications for their function. Social representations function by providing a meaning for the objects of talk common to a group of speakers. A representation imparts meaning by assimilating objects to general categories of thought. Because they have this codifying effect, social representations allow an individual to pick out some part of the environment in the knowledge that the object so identified will have the same type of meaning for those who share his or her social representations as it does for himself or herself. Experience is constrained by social representations in that the world of an individual is only meaningful to the extent that social representations *give* it meaning (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 7). This constraining feature of social representations demonstrates that social representations are more than a mere mode of communication: they have the capacity to *construct* the meaning of what is communicated. For this reason Moscovici thus contrasts the theory of social representations with information processing perspectives by emphasising that for the social representations' theorist, 'factuality is never at the core of the exchanges between members of society' (Moscovici, 1984a, p. 963).

Social representations endow experience with meaning in a constructive manner, and thereby determine the way an individual thinks about and

responds to his/her experience. This has two consequences. In the first place, it means that social representations' theory provides a principled demarcation of the limits of social groups. If social representations determine meaning, then all of those who share a particular social representation will agree in their understanding and evaluation of the world in some respect. Social representations place individuals in identifiable groups just as surely as do physical characteristics or occupational status, (Moscovici, 1985, p. 91). Put another way, for a social representations' theorist, what makes a group a group is exactly the shared representations of its members⁶.

The second consequence of this constructive aspect of social representations is that they allow people to feel familiar with a world which, otherwise, might seem strange and threatening. This is best understood by considering, in detail, the way in which social representations are said to construct meaning. The two key concepts in such a consideration are the twin concepts of anchoring and objectification.

Anchoring and Objectification

To see how social representations bestow meaning on objects, says Moscovici, one should examine the way they make an unfamiliar world familiar by considering the case of a group of individuals (or an individual group member) confronted by a novel, unfamiliar, experience. Because human beings have an innate desire to make sense of their world, these individuals can be expected to assimilate this new experience to their existing knowledge. That is, the unfamiliar experience produces what Moscovici calls a 'fracture or fissure' in the group's perceptions which incites their curiosity and induces them to 'take hold' of the unfamiliar concept (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 29–30). Once the group has taken hold of the unfamiliar object, they attempt to make the experienced object more familiar – a process which operates through the social representations.

The unfamiliar object is first assigned to one of the categories of thought which makes up the social representation – a form of classification which Moscovici calls 'anchoring'. This anchoring procedure depends upon the fact that social representations are built around a nucleus which is a prototype or paradigm for the category class. In this respect, social representations resemble the more familiar notion of prototypes (Cantor & Mischel, 1977; Rosch et al., 1976). When a group anchors some unfamiliar object, it does so by relating it to the paradigmatic or prototypical case which lies at the heart of the relevant social representation (Moscovici, 1984a, p. 953) Once an object has been anchored to a social representation it acquires, in the eyes of the anchoring group, the

characteristics and tendencies of the group prototype. This assimilation to the prototype bestows a meaning on the object which it lacked in its unfamiliar state (Moscovici, 1984b, p.35).

The anchoring process is accompanied by another process which Moscovici calls 'objectification'. Once an unfamiliar experience has been drawn into one or other of the group's social representation categories, its essential elements are reproduced, within the minds of group members, in pictorial form (except in the case of taboo subjects etc.). This image is then seen in relation to those other images which form the nucleus of the prototype and, subsequently, the image of the erstwhile unfamiliar object is amalgamated with those other, nuclear, images. Such images then become reality for the group, in the sense that when group members talk about the world they are, in fact, talking about these images (Moscovici, 1984b, p.40). In this way, the capacity of social representations to make the unfamiliar world familiar allows them to operate as entities which construct or bestow meanings.

The objectification process has both historical (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 29) and prescriptive elements (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 9). It is historical in that the social representations which are, for us, reality are partly the result of earlier objectification processes. It is prescriptive in that the constraining force of such representations is a power which cannot be resisted:

'Nobody's mind is free from the effect of the prior conditioning which is imposed by his representations, language and culture. . . . We see only that which underlying conventions allow us to see . . . representations are prescriptive, that is they impose themselves upon us with an irresistible force. This force is a combination of a structure which is present before we have begun to think and of a tradition which decrees what we should think.' (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 8–9.)

So the prescriptive power of social representations, stemming from the objectification process, is a consequence of the influence of the past over us. The reality of yesterday controls the reality of today, says Moscovici, such that intellectual activity constitutes a mere rehearsal or representation of what has already gone before, in that our minds are conditioned by representations which are forced upon us.

Moscovici claims that the theory of social representations explains not only veridical judgement but also illusion (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 38). As social representations are partly made up of iconic elements, they are not required to obey the dictates of logic such as the law of non-contradiction. Thus social representations exist which cannot accord with reality – and this means that groups of individuals can impose illusory interpretations on their experiences. Illusion and reality are, says Moscovici, achievements which have the same explanation: both are related to the world of representations.

The Consensual Universe

For Moscovici, then, social representations are mental entities made up of abstract and pictorial elements which function via the categories through which individuals construe their world. And in this way they act as group parameters which separate out individuals in terms of how they see the world. All of this shows, says Moscovici, that 'knowledge of the world' is not the same concept for social psychologists as it is for others, such as those involved in the physical sciences.

Moscovici proposes a fundamental distinction between a 'reified universe' and a 'consensual universe' (Moscovici, 1984b, pp. 19–23). The former is constituted by objects whose qualities and characteristics exist independently of individual interpretation and which combine to form brute facts. In the latter universe – the domain of the social psychologist – objective facts, as such, do not exist. The world of the consensual universe is one in which facts are imbued with meaning for individuals and things are as they are conceived to be: a conception of an object becomes a perception of that object. (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 40). What the social scientist must understand, says Moscovici, is that the scientific model of knowing and learning about the world is inappropriate for the study of the consensual universe, for such a model cannot encompass the essential creativity of social representations (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 13).

Examples of such reality construction are, says Moscovici, as numerous as social representations themselves. However the most obvious examples of such constructiveness are probably those in which a scientific theory comes to be disseminated throughout common sense. Moscovici reports, for example (Hewstone & Moscovici, 1983), that the scientific hypothesis of functional specialization between the cerebral hemispheres has become part of 'folk neuroscience'. Non-scientists have, purportedly, taken up this notion and transformed it into the claim that people really have two minds, a claim which is then used to explain the existence of cultural dichotomies such as 'rationality v. intuitiveness' and 'masculinity v. femininity'. In such a process of transformation, then, a particular scientific theory is seized upon by laymen and is re-created anew (Moscovici, 1984a, p. 964). The ramifications of such a social representational dissemination and transformation for group membership can be seen by comparing those who see the world in terms of the split brain social representation with those who see it in terms of an alternative such as the common sense version of psychoanalysis.

According to Moscovici, then, social representations shape our collective consciousness, and so social psychological notions such as 'attitudes', 'opinions' and 'social groups' will be inherently faulty unless they come to

terms with this shaping process – unless, that is, they are given a location within the consensual universe. For a social psychology to be worthy of the name, it must deal, at some point, with the social representations.

Summary

The most important aspects of social representation theory are: (A) social representations have a form which is partly abstract and partly pictorial; (B) they function by allowing people to make joint sense of an unfamiliar world, and they, thereby, mark the psychological parameters of groups; (C) they assimilate the unfamiliar, through the process of anchoring and objectification; (D) objectification prescribes how an individual will see the world; (E) the prescriptive force of social representations can be thought of in terms of the past influencing the present; (F) this influence means that the world is as it is given to us by our social representations – in this sense, social representations constitute our reality; and (G) that our world is constrained by our social representations in this way shows that the social scientist, unlike the physical scientist, must confine his analyses to this consensual universe. Taken together, this provides a powerful argument for the primacy, in social psychological study, of the social representation. In the next section we will critically evaluate the validity of this argument.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: A CRITIQUE

Creating the world

We will start our assessment with Moscovici's contention that social representations constitute reality⁷, for this constructive element lies at the heart of the theory. The importance of the reality-constituting thesis stems from its attempt to tackle, head-on, the question of how social psychology can develop theories which take proper account of the active, meaning-constructing nature of human existence.

The answer provided by Moscovici is that human beings encounter the world *only in terms of* meaning-imbued experience — experience constituted by social representations. Moscovici does not deny that there is a world beyond social representations, but maintains that the outside world does not directly enter our social relations. Thus, according to Moscovici, sometimes representations are not recognised as such — they are 'not thought of as symbols but as reality' (Moscovici, 1985, p. 91). Such symbols do, however, 'correspond' to objects in the outside world (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 5).

A problem exists, however, in reconciling this emphasis on the constitutive nature of social representations with Moscovici's claim that there is a world *beyond* social representations. If social representations constitute our reality, such that all thought is predetermined by social representations (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 36; Moscovici, 1983, p. 129), then the notion that there is a world beyond the world of social representations would seem to have no content. If 'representations are all we have', then there is no coherent way to understand talk of a world which can be presented to us independently of those representations.

Furthermore social representations are said to be responsible for both veridical and illusory experience (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 38). But this, too, is problematic, for on Moscovici's formulation, we are left with no criterion of correctness which could establish the difference between illusion and reality as separable elements in our experience. Moscovici is certain that social representations *can* be wrong (Moscovici, 1983, p. 134) but what Moscovici fails to tell us is how to distinguish wrong representations from right ones. If social representations determine our reality, there seems to be no way left in which to make out the claim that nevertheless, for us, some of those representations are wrong.

There is a tempting, and superficially convincing, response to these points. This is that *science* tells us what the real world is like. Science recovers the unvarnished facts against which the correctness of social representations can be checked. Now, on at least some occasions, Moscovici certainly seems to regard scientific knowledge as independent of social representations as, for example, when he talks of a 'language of observation, expressing pure facts' (Moscovici 1984b, p. 17). There is, however, a crucial difficulty with the suggestion that scientific knowledge could act as a standard of correctness.

If science is to distinguish between correct and incorrect representations, then this seems to invite a form of reductionism. For the question of whether a representation is correct would reduce to the question of whether that social representation adequately reflects what would be the content of supposedly objective scientific knowledge claims. The problem here is that this position treats social representations as a mere level of analysis, adopted for reasons of brevity, clarity and so on; a level of analysis which could, if required, be analysed out into scientific terms (perceptions, cognitions or whatever). However, given that the essence of social representation theory is that it *rejects* the idea that human social life can be fully explained by reference to neutral, factual, information, Moscovici would be unlikely to adopt this course. Indeed, he seems explicitly to repudiate this view (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 4).

Overall, then, Moscovici's suggestion that social representations *constitute* experience for individuals seems to clash with his claims that

social representations may correspond to an 'outside' world and that social representations can be either right *or* wrong – that individuals have *both* veridical *and* illusory experiences. And attempts to defend these ancillary claims by an appeal to scientific knowledge as a standard of correctness are undermined by the undesirable consequence that social representations would then be reducible to more basic scientific talk. Moscovici's work represents a timely reminder that social psychology must go beyond reductionist theories when accounting for the active, constructive elements in human experience. But the ambiguity over the status of the 'outside' world, in relation to the world of the social representation, seems to weaken Moscovici's claim that social representation theory provides such an advance.

Social representations v. scientific knowledge

So far, we have argued that Moscovici's discussion of scientific knowledge cannot be construed as talk of an objective form of knowledge representing a criterion of correctness for social representations⁸. However, it remains true that one of the strengths of Moscovici's approach is that it sets out explicitly to demarcate the relationship between social psychology and other, 'harder' sciences. Consequently, it might be thought that Moscovici's model of science as knowledge of 'pure fact' is at least *consistent* with the view that social representations constitute our reality, even if talk of correctness criteria must be abandoned. It may well seem that, even in the context of a social representations' theory, it at least *makes sense* to talk of scientific knowledge of facts which are independent of social representations. But this is not the case. Moscovici says that all individuals make sense of their social interactions only through the medium of social representations (Moscovici, 1983, p. 129). Moreover, in line with recent social studies of science, he accepts that the practice of science is a form of social interaction that is, itself, prey to the influences of history and tradition (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 28).

Thus it seems that scientists, like all other individuals, must rely on their social representations when making sense of their own activities. This follows directly from Moscovici's claim that all thought is necessarily social (Moscovici, 1983, p. 135) and that all action, to be understood, must be translatable into social representations (Moscovici, 1984a, p. 951). It would, therefore, be a profound mistake to think of science as an unproblematically asocial realm of activities in which knowledge of 'pure fact' is generated; the scientist is as much trapped in his social world as is the layman.

According to Moscovici's own suggestions, then, not only is it impos-

sible to treat scientific knowledge as a standard of correctness for social representations, but the whole distinction between social representations and scientific knowledge becomes unclear. For the individual, whether layman *or* scientist, there are only social representations. As a consequence, the idea that scientific knowledge can be regarded as, in any way, immune from the effects of social representations, as is suggested by Moscovici's talk of language expressing 'pure facts', must be rejected.

The consensual universe revisited

There is a temptation to respond to the foregoing by claiming that, while laymen inhabit consensual universes where the mode of knowledge is the social representation, scientists work in a reified universe in which the mode of knowledge is science and that, consequently, scientists just *do* gain non-social, objective knowledge of the world. The problem with this position is that the distinction between reified and consensual universes is, by and large, supposed to be understood *in terms of* the distinction between social representations-based knowledge and the objective form of knowledge typified by science. It follows that any attempt to explain the difference between scientific knowledge and social representations-based knowledge by way of the distinction between reified and consensual universes will be simply circular. Even if such circularity could be avoided, the claim that scientists do gain objective knowledge would still stand in contradiction to Moscovici's fundamental thesis that all social activities involve social representations and that reality is what is given by those representations.⁹

Perhaps most, importantly, the claim that scientists deliver objective reports on the world, because they work in a reified universe, raises the same issue of reductionism that was brought out, earlier, when the suggestion was mooted that science might serve as a standard of correctness for social representations. If there is any form of objective perception of the world available to scientists then, independently of whether we take it to be a criterion of correctness for social representations, there seems to be no reason why *social* scientists should be restricted to basing their understanding of social phenomena on the study of essentially social, meaning-imbued social representations – which Moscovici himself describes as 'vague' (Moscovici, 1985, p. 91) – when they could study the objective facts of the matter instead. So there seems to be nothing wrong with the claim that the social scientist need not stop his analysis at the level of the social representation; he or she could go further and discover the objective facts beyond those representations. And if this is a possibility, then there ought to be no difficulty in reductively

construing those representations in terms of such facts. And this would be clearly contrary to Moscovici's own view (Moscovici, 1983, p. 142).

Of course someone might say that the difference between the *social* scientist and the *non-social* scientist is that the former just does not have access to the kind of objective knowledge with which the latter deals. The social psychologist *is* a scientist (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 23) – but works in the realm of social science. However this objection will impress only those who have already forgotten that the distinction between the social and the non-social is precisely the distinction which talk of the scientist's access to objective knowledge, in contrast to social representations-based knowledge, is supposed to explain.¹⁰ In general, then, it seems that Moscovici's discussion of scientific knowledge does not mesh with his account of the essentially social nature of social representations, in that any non-circular account of the distinction between scientific knowledge and social representations-based knowledge seems to lead to a species of reductionism.

The realm of the unfamiliar

Similar issues arise in Moscovici's account of the functioning of social representations. Individuals are said to make sense of the world by anchoring unfamiliar objects to social representational prototypes. But this implies that, in some fashion, individuals perceive these unfamiliar objects prior to anchoring them. Moscovici himself expresses this notion in a number of different ways, stating, for example, that individuals 'take hold of an unfamiliar idea'¹¹ and that 'we . . . draw something foreign . . . into our system of categories' (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 29). Moscovici also claims that the unfamiliar object world is 'perceived at first in a purely intellectual, remote universe'. (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 38). The problem here is that Moscovici gives no adequate account of how this 'drawing-in' or 'taking hold' is to operate. All thought and perception is, according to Moscovici, based on social representations and so this seems to rule out 'taking hold' of unfamiliar objects as a cognitive or perceptual process. Nevertheless Moscovici insists not only that such a process does occur but that study of the realm of the unfamiliar is, in the last resort, the true goal of the social psychologist (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 28), in which case it seems legitimate to ask how the process of taking hold *does* operate.

This brings us back to the problem of how the world can be experienced independently of social representations. If there is content to the notion of 'taking hold' of the 'unfamiliar', then Moscovici ought to explain why it is wrong, reductively, to construe human social cognition, in terms of that non-social representations notion, given that such 'taking hold' will, by hypothesis, itself be an essential element in social life.

Neither this point, nor the earlier doubts raised in connection with Moscovici's account of scientific knowledge, should be taken as a plea for the validity of some form of cognitive reductionism. Both sets of issues are raised solely to illustrate the fact that social representations' theory, as formulated by Moscovici, seems to involve a line of argument which can offer no reason as to why the social ought not to be regarded as, in principle, reducible to more basic cognitive notions. The worry is: if it is a necessary feature of Moscovici's theory that some people (scientists) often experience the world independently of social representations, and most people sometimes experience the world independently of social representations (in taking hold of the unfamiliar), then why should the social scientist accept Moscovici's claim that talk of phenomena such as opinions and attitudes should be supplanted by talk of entities – social representations – which are in some way essentially social?

History and the social representation

The problems which Moscovici's theory faces with regard to the relationships between reality and illusion, between the consensual and the reified universe and between the familiar and the unfamiliar are compounded by a further tension in Moscovici's account. As was seen earlier, Moscovici insists that social representations *historically* determine the way individuals see the world and react to it. Our representations grow out of *earlier* traditions and prescribe how we are to experience and understand the world of the *present*. It is in this historically prescriptive light that we are to take the claim that social representations constitute our environment – they constitute our environment because the present world is, for us, determined by the world of the past (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 41). Now it may well seem that in general, Moscovici's emphasis on the historicity of human experience acts as a valuable counter to perspectives which treat experience in an overly simplistic de-contextualised fashion. However, the problem with Moscovici's formulation of this historical claim is, first, that it seems to leave no room for a change in the content of social representations and, secondly, that it also seems to require that individuals be regarded as nothing more than the victims (or dupes) of their representations.

The root cause of these problems lies in the strength of Moscovici's formulation of the historical thesis. As we noted above, Moscovici claims that social representations 'impose themselves upon us with an irresistible force' in such a way that 'nobody's mind is free from the effects of the prior conditioning which is imposed by his representations'. And this is to be understood in the following way:

... our manner of thinking, and what we think, depend on such representations, that is on the fact that we have, or have not, a given representation. I mean they are forced upon us ... The peculiar power and clarity of representations ... derives from the success with which they control the reality of today through that of yesterday ... (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 10.)

If what we think is governed by our social representations, and if our representations are irresistibly imposed upon us by the reality of the past, then there is no room left for the notion that, nevertheless, we can influence our social representations or experience change in their content. For the question of the content of a representation is settled by the past, and it is the representations which govern us, not we them.

Now it is important to be clear about this claim. We are not suggesting that Moscovici denies the possibility of change in the content of a social representation; nor that he denies that individuals influence the nature of social representations through their employment of those representations. Moscovici explicitly propounds both of these contentions (Moscovici, 1984a, p. 950). Nor are we suggesting that there could not be an account of the past influencing the present which allowed for change and individual involvement. The problem is that Moscovici's formulation of the 'past influences the present' thesis is *so* strong that it rules out any notion of individual influences or subsequent change. He *claims* that social representations are both changeable and yet open to individual influence, but this claim is just inconsistent with what he has to say about the historically prescriptive nature of such representations.

There is a potential response to this, which is to claim that social representations, in an important sense, just *are* their instances of application by individuals and groups; all there is to a social representation are the occasions on which that representation is employed in communication. This would be one interpretation of the kind of dependence inherent in social representations described earlier. The suggestion here would be that a social representation cannot help but be conditioned by the specific, contemporary uses to which it is put by individuals, just because that social representation is nothing but those uses.

There are two problems with this response, however. On the one hand, it seems to contradict Moscovici's own claim that social representations are more than mere collections of specific historical utterances (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 9). On the other hand, it seems to leave no room whatsoever for any prescriptive content. If a social representation just is its instances, there is nothing left over in terms of which one can make out the notion of prescription. It seems, then, that this extreme form of dependence is completely inconsistent with Moscovici's historical thesis, and thus cannot be a response coherently open to Moscovici.

CONCLUSION

In the course of our discussion we have identified four basic areas of difficulty with social representations theory:-

(1) The stress on the constructive influence of representations on all thought allows no room for the proposed distinction between reality and illusion. Put another way, there is no representation-free way of identifying which representations are veridical and which are not.

(2) Likewise, the proposed distinction between scientific knowledge and knowledge based on representations fails because there is no coherent way, within the theory, for justifying why scientists should be any more immune from the effects of representations than other people.

(3) The central cognitive mechanism for dealing with novel objects gives no proper account of how the process of 'taking hold' takes place. Moscovici has it that all cognition is based on representations, yet novel phenomena are exactly those with which representations cannot deal.

(4) The historical thesis which Moscovici propounds is so strong that it leaves no opportunity for representations to change and leaves people as puppets of those representations. This problem is especially poignant given the value Moscovici has placed on the theory's explanation of dynamic processes.

Given that there are these central contradictions in the theory, it is perhaps not surprising that empirical research has tended to use it only as a loose springboard, or has picked, selectively, from certain of Moscovici's claims. For example, despite being central to the theory, empirical studies rarely pay more than a passing acknowledgement to the mechanisms of anchoring and objectification or draw on the distinction between the reified and the consensual universes. We suggest that this neglect is not coincidental but is, at least partly, a consequence of the difficulty of operationalising the theory. If we take the tensions in the notions of anchoring and objectification, along with the sheer problem of identifying, as an empirical entity, a social representation (partly a consequence of the difficulty in specifying the nature of consensus in practice – Litton & Potter, 1985; Potter & Litton, 1985) it becomes virtually impossible to imagine a clear-cut empirical test for the existence of these hypothetical mechanisms.

Moscovici suggests that vagueness is a virtue of social representations theory, because it allows it to be developed and defined in the course of empirical studies (Moscovici, 1985, p. 91). However, it is also the recipe for a pot-pourri of contradictory ideas, seasoned with some pieces of speculative cognitive psychology. The danger is that this can all be institutionalised into a research tradition which produces findings whose status cannot properly be assessed.

To end with, we must emphasise that our response to these problems has not been a return to more traditional social psychological explanatory notions. Many of their problems have been only too clearly demonstrated by Moscovici himself. Instead, we have been exploring the analytic possibilities of discourse analysis (Gilbert & Mulkey, 1984; McKinlay & Potter, 1987; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), a perspective which embodies a number of the important insights of social representations theory, whilst attempting to avoid the sort of conceptual tangles documented above.

Andrew McKinlay and Jonathan Potter,
Psychological Laboratory,
University of St. Andrews,
St. Andrews,
Fife KY16 9JU

NOTES

¹ The work in this paper is based on research carried out by the first author towards a Master's degree at the University of St. Andrews.

² There is also, of course, a substantial body of empirical work on social representations, much of it in French.

³ Moscovici, 1984b, p. 16. Moscovici notes a number of differences between the two concepts, emphasising the relative dynamism of social representations.

⁴ There is no space to explore in this paper the problematic and as yet unexplicated relationship between Moscovici's work on social representations and his work on minority influence.

⁵ Moscovici cautions against the separating out of content and function in an over simple fashion – see Moscovici, 1983, p. 143 – but nevertheless emphasises the importance of the distinction – see Moscovici, 1984a, p. 946.

⁶ The issue here is complicated by Moscovici's acceptance of the 'taxonomic group' v. 'structured group' distinction put forward by Rom Harré. See Moscovici, 1984a, pp. 958–60.

⁷ Moscovici offers several formulations of this thesis: 'representations constitute, for us, a type of reality' (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 8); 'representations end up by constituting an actual environment' (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 12); 'a representation constitutes a social reality *sui generis*' (Moscovici, 1984b, p. 13). See the article, in this issue, by Wells.

⁸ At times, Moscovici (1985) has stressed the key role played by certain individuals in mediating between the 'culture of science' and 'popular culture'. This issue is, by and large, not relevant to our discussion, however, because our concern is with Moscovici's notion of what would count as a science, rather than with the processes through which such a science develops.

⁹ On occasion, Moscovici claims that the nature of a group's social representations is partly a matter of the *culture* of that group (Moscovici 1983, p. 134) and this line of thinking has been developed by Farr (1984, 1986). However given (a) the variety of technical uses of the notion of culture and (b) the complex issues raised by theoretical studies of culture by such diverse authors as Levi-Strauss (1968), Williams (1958) and Foucault (1972) and (c) the multifarious, everyday, uses of this concept, it seems clear that 'culture' does not denote a precise, well defined phenomenon. It is unlikely, therefore, that an appeal to the idea of social representation-as-cultural-product will, of itself, resolve the problematic issues raised

here. It seems, rather, that a range of further problems – specific to the theory of social representations – may well present itself, such as the difficulties involved in the analytic disentanglement of ‘culture’ from ‘consensual universe’, the clear separation of ‘culture’ from ‘social representation’ and the model implied by the suggestion that social representations are cultural products.

¹⁰ Moscovici suggests that social psychology should deal with the consensual universe, which is the realm dealt with by social representations. Since science is the study of reified universes, this precludes taking social psychology (or similar enterprises such as ‘mass psychology’ or ‘political economy’) in any unproblematic way as a science.

¹¹ Moscovici, 1981, p. 192. This is, by and large, merely an earlier, slightly different translation of Moscovici, 1984b.

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