

## *Beyond Social Representations: the Conceptual Bases of the Structural Approach on Social Thinking*

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### Abstract

The present paper is a conceptual essay on the structural approach on social thinking, a research stream that aims at studying the influence of social factors in thinking processes through characterization of relationship structures. The presentation of the approach focuses on the notion of structure, the specificity of thinking processes and the role of communication. Finally, the trend of bridging social thinking and social cognition research traditions is commented, and the need of studies focusing on the social origin of the studied processes and the integration of communication into research is addressed. *Keywords:* social thinking; social representations; structural approach; communication.

### Além das Representações Sociais: as Bases Conceituais da Abordagem Estrutural do Pensamento Social Resumo

O presente artigo é um ensaio conceitual sobre a abordagem estrutural do pensamento social, um campo de pesquisa que visa estudar a influência de fatores sociais nos processos de pensamento através da caracterização de estruturas de relações. A apresentação da abordagem enfoca a noção de estrutura, a especificidade de processos de pensamento e o papel da comunicação. Finalmente, a tendência de aproximar as tradições de pesquisa do pensamento social e cognição social e trata-se da necessidade de estudos enfocando a origem social dos processos estudados e a integração da comunicação nas pesquisas. *Palavras-chave:* pensamento social; representações sociais; abordagem estrutural; comunicação.

The structural approach on social thinking is originally a French perspective that emerged in the 1970s and 80s. It studies the effects of social variables in thinking processes through the identification and characterization of relationship structures involving cognitive formations. The name ‘social thinking’, our translation to the French expression *pensée sociale*<sup>2</sup>, other than indicating the main processes of interest, is also useful to differentiate it from the social cognition perspective, the most diffused social psychology stream. It has been around 40 years since the social thinking approach gave its first steps, and research has grown considerably both in terms of number of studies and investigated topics (Rouquette, 2009a). The present essay is an effort aimed at presenting an up-to-date general overview of the key concepts and

baseline theoretical perspectives of the structural approach on social thinking, as well as what some of its future directions might be.

It is usually the case that the structural approach is considered as a school within a single theory of social psychology, i.e., social representations theory (Moscovici, 1976; Wagner & Hayes, 2005). As such, the structural school is taken only as an effort to study and theorize about a few aspects of social representations, which is complementary to the classical dimensional approach (Jodelet, 1989), just as other perspectives are concerned with particular processes such as social anchoring (Doise, Clemence & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1992), and the relations of representations with dialogicality (Markova, 2003). Rather, even if the theoretical developments of the structural approach have been provided through the study of social representations, the structural understanding of social thinking processes is a theoretical framework that can be applied to a wider range of sociopsychological phenomena. For that matter, it is important to stress that if the structural approach has been fairly popular in the French tradition of study of social representations, the structural ‘look’ on social and human sciences has been developed outside that field, in works of authors such as Lévi-Strauss (1958)

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<sup>2</sup> Other authors (e.g. Wolter, Gurrieri & Sorribas, 2009) have preferred to translate it as ‘social thought’. We chose the expression ‘thinking’ instead, on the understanding that it might reflect more the process of thinking rather than its product, thought.

in anthropology, Piaget (1968) in genetic psychology and Codol (1969) in social psychology. Therefore, in this text we chose to present the structural approach as a stream directed not only toward the study of social representations, but to the sociopsychological study of knowledge and representations in general.

Throughout the text, the main fields of study are presented and discussed; first the basic concepts of structure and its relations with cognition and representation processes are addressed, followed by the presentation of social thinking. At the final section we discuss briefly the state of structural research on social thinking in general.

It must be stressed also that the current review is restricted to the conceptual and methodological framework of the 'French' structural approach itself, in order to present it in its own terms<sup>3</sup>. As such, it is not our intention to thoroughly assess the similarities and divergences of the approach in comparison to social representation schools and other perspectives in social psychology. Efforts in that direction have been provided by authors such as Lahlou (1996), who has proposed an evolutionist model of social representation propagation that integrates structural components with developments from 'standard' social representations theory; and Parales Quenza (2005), who has identified similarities between the structural and social cognition perspectives. In the present text, the reference to other theoretical bodies within social psychology is made only when it is essential to understand concepts and trends within the structural approach itself. Finally, for space purposes, the text is organized so as to point out to the theoretical contributions of the mentioned works. Individual studies and essays are not described, and the reader is directed to the original sources in order to obtain methodological details. As such, the present review is perhaps more useful for readers with a minimum familiarity with the approach or with research on social representations; for reviews, see Abric (2001), Wachelke and Camargo (2007) Rateau, Moliner, Guimelli & Abric (2011), or Wachelke (2012a).

### Structure, cognition and representation

A structure is a system formed by interconnected units, comprising the laws that regulate its functioning. Treating a structure like a system means that a change in one component can bring about modifications in any other element. A structure possesses three basic

characteristics: it is a whole, a meaningful unit; it can be transformed, it is not static; and it includes self-regulation mechanisms that guarantee its conservation as a system. Also, a structure can be formalized, in order to predict its functioning, and it is that capacity that carries the scientific interest associated to a structural approach (Lévi-Strauss, 1958; Piaget, 1968).

However, a structure is not natural; it does not exist independently of the researcher that formulates it (Rouquette, 2008). This formulation activity involves the identification of relationships in a restricted portion of phenomenal reality and their formalization in a theoretical model (Rouquette, 1985). The structure is the theoretical model that is applied to reality, and not reality itself (Lévi-Strauss, 1958).

In social psychology, the structural approach has been employed to study cognition. Codol (1969) proposed a unifying terminology for the classification of cognitive processes and activities, providing key concepts such as *cognem*, cognitive universe, representation and cognitive structure. He posited that the smallest and most basic units of every theoretical system were to be called *cognems*. Such is the case of beliefs, opinions, ideas, attributes or items. Those *cognems* are integrated in interdependent sets, and the set comprising all *cognems* of an individual forms the cognitive universe. A representation is the interdependence between an individual's *cognems* and an object external to the individual itself. Consequently, cognitive structure is the set of organization rules of the *cognems* within the cognitive universe, and representation structure is a concept that refers to the organization rules of single representations.

Much of the social psychology of cognition is dedicated to the understanding of the representation construct, as well as to the processes related to it. A representation is a sociopsychological construct that performs a symbolic role, representing something – an object – to someone – a person or group. While doing so, the representation actually substitutes the object it represents, and therefore becomes the object itself, for the person or group that refers to it (Moscovici, 1976). It is a quasi-concept, i.e., a set of poorly defined criteria to assign properties to something (Rouquette, 1985) that takes as object precisely what that quasi-concept commands (Flament & Rouquette, 2003). As such, a representation is a product that results from a process of representing, and always replaces the object that a social subject links to it. In other words, the object can only be accessed through a representation; for a given social subject, that representation 'is' the object (Abric, 1994a).

The subordination of a representation to a general "representing" process, determined by various socio-

<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that some authors refer to a structural analysis of social representations outside the framework of the 'French' structural approach; see Wagner, Valencia & Elejabarrieta, 1996.

psychological variables and constraints, means that a representation is an event in itself, and not a substance or “thing” (Rouquette, 1994a, 1995). To represent is to think, and physiological, physical and social variables must be taken into account to understand the process of thinking. If the general aim of social psychology is to study social interaction processes and to explain the influence played by belonging to groups on psychological processes (Maisonneuve, 1993), then it is essential to deal with the relations between thinking and social variables.

Finally, it must be stressed that a structural approach aims at identifying structural processes and properties, independently of the contents of specific representations or symbols. If one needs to rely on content specificity to explain a social thinking process, then that explanation does not have much structural interest. The goal is to go the other way around: to achieve formalization and theoretical development that enable a generalization to object classes, rather than restrict regularity to a specific social representation. As Rouquette and Rateau (1998) sustained, content is then considered as a secondary quality; it is not the focus of analysis.

### Definitions and specificity of social thinking

Rouquette (1973) coined the expression social thinking to identify a modality of thinking that takes place naturally in social situations. He was inspired by isolated sociopsychological discoveries that pointed out to a common underlying process. Such discoveries included the findings that people tend to execute the smaller possible amount of cognitive operations, following a cognitive economy principle (Abelson & Rosenberg, 1958); that thinking is motivated, i.e., people think in a way that provides them with maximum gain, while minimizing lack of satisfaction (Rosenberg & Abelson, 1960); that people judge propositions according to what is desirable, and not only logical (McGuire, 1968); that people organize their ideas one-dimensionally and based on extreme occurrences (De Soto, London & Handel, 1965); and that people tend to infer social meanings and justifications for loose information (Heider, 1967).

There is a two-fold meaning for the ‘social’ in social thinking. First, it is a form of thinking about the social sphere, i.e. the objects of thinking are aspects of social life linked to relationships among people and groups. This way, social thinking refers to the thinking processes about social objects (Rouquette, 1988). A social object is a focus of reflected practices among people, including the discourse about those practices (Rouquette, 1994b). Common thinking is social by nature,

as it involves people connected through communication networks. A social object is an issue that people talk about, something that has at least a minimum degree of social salience in order to attract the interest of groups and be present in the content of communication exchanges (Flament & Rouquette, 2003).

The second meaning refers to the fact that social variables, such as belonging to different groups, interfere with thinking processes (Rouquette, 1988). Social thinking involves a set of reasoning processes that subordinate cognition to sociability criteria and needs, constraining it (Flament & Rouquette, 2003). Social factors work as a metasystem that directs individual cognition according to social norms, values and needs (Doise, 1989; Guimelli, 1999).

Concerning the cognitive products of social thinking, one might compare the logical mistakes made by common sense with biases and treat them merely as faulty information processing. Yet, a closer look reveals that social thinking generates products that are perfectly functional for their goals, obeying a principle of adequacy to social context needs (Rouquette, 1973). Social thinking aims at explaining isolated cases, protecting group identity and providing a practical understanding of social reality, that works as a cognitive shortcut (Guimelli, 1999).

Finally, social thinking is not a chaotic variety of cognitive activity. It does not follow formal logic rules, but a social logic of its own, with rules that can be identified and studied scientifically; it is, therefore, one of the main objects of study of social psychology (Rouquette, 1973). Some of the basic operations of social thinking were identified by Moscovici (1976): the mere proximity of two events is enough for social subjects to establish a causal explanation; social subjects formulate their conclusions first and afterwards look for plausible premises to justify them; and social subjects’ intentions and motivations determine the selection of causes and formulation of thinking products. Two other operations have later been identified by Rouquette (1994c): social subjects rely on information that confirms their views about an issue; and they make use of examples of isolated cases as evidence that something is true.

Recently, Rouquette (2009b) has synthesized the findings and theoretical propositions about social thinking in three properties. The first one is the multiquification of relations. It means that two cognemes can be connected by various types of relation operators simultaneously, even if they are seemingly contradictory. This implies that social thinking always allows a certain degree of uncertainty, nurturing multiple interpretations of events and changing them according to context variability. A second property is the restriction of reasoning spaces: social thinking operates taking

into account the immediate context and the needs of the subjects that are implied by a social situation, and neglecting careful consideration of past history and future projections. Finally, social thinking products undergo a tautological validity: they acquire the status of being 'true' to someone not due to objective evidence, but simply because a person or group holds them as being true. What explains why a belief or representation is true for someone is the relationship that the subject of knowledge maintains with its object and the role that holding that belief has for the subject of group.

### Social thinking structures: the architecture

Social thinking processes result in different modalities of structured symbolic formations. Each of those formations covers a different aspect of social knowledge in a spectrum ranging from individual formations such as opinions or attitudes to shared knowledge such as social representations and ideologies. Those formations are organized in a model called the architecture of social thinking, proposed by Rouquette, (1996a). The author postulated that the architecture is a hierarchy of nested reasons, as symbolic formations from the individual, lower-levels, would be explained and organized by upper-level formations.

As such, the diversity of individual opinions would be generated explained by attitudes<sup>4</sup>, affective dispositions concerning object classes. Attitudes are justified and explained by social representations, practical knowledge shared by group members about social objects, i.e. every day life topics that are relevant to the lives of groups. At the other extreme of the model, ideologies, widely shared world views, organize systems of social representations (Flament & Rouquette, 2003).

Most of the research within the social thinking field has been about social representations. The nature of social representation structure is probably the most studied phenomenon according to the perspective, through experimental and correlational strategies that resemble cognitive social psychology. A theory that is already classical states that a social representation is a structure comprising two systems formed by elements (beliefs, ideas, and so on). A first system is composed by the consensual and more resistant elements that define the most important and defining aspects of what a group thinks about a social object: such system is called central core. A second system is called peripheral, consisting of elements that are more particular and flexible, adapting the social representa-

tion to specific contexts and practices (Abric, 1994a, 1994b). While still considered the main theory of the structural approach, recent studies have suggested that social representation structure might not be that simple. There is evidence that the systems involve a series of overlapping properties that provide a system of coordinates that determines the functioning of social representations as reading grids (Lheureux, Rateau & Guimelli, 2008), that the activation of elements in the so-called core is complex and has to take mutual elements into account (Lheureux & Lo Monaco, 2011), or even research questioning the validity of a dichotomous model altogether and evoking a continuous nature of the centrality property of social representation elements (Wachelke, in press). Another important contribution from social representations research is the Basic Cognitive Schemes model (Guimelli & Rouquette, 1992), a framework to classify knowledge relations. Its importance transcends social representations research and can be potentially extended to the study of all kinds of declarative knowledge (Wachelke, 2012b).

The main concepts involving social representations and the Basic Cognitive Schemes model would merit a paper of its own. For detailed information on the matter, see the previously mentioned reviews on the topic (i.e., Abric, 2001; Wachelke & Camargo, 2007; Rateau *et al.*, 2011; Wachelke, 2012a).

### Communication

Finally, social thinking cannot be dissociated from the framework of social communication conditions. Communication is the instance through which social thinking is transmitted, elaborated and transformed. Both social communication and social thinking reflect social structures, and therefore they are to be considered two aspects of a same broad phenomenon (Rouquette, 1996a, 1996b). Social thinking processes operate in two communication spheres, basically: private interpersonal contexts and mass media related to the press (Moliner, 2001). It is through interpersonal communication with group members, through conversation (Moscovici, 1984), written exchanges or spreading of rumors (Renard, 2009) that opinions are created, shared, interpreted, reverberated, legitimated and diffused, in a way that is compatible with ingroup views and goals. Also, it is in those private arenas that battles of ideas take place and people persuade and influence each other (Eyssartier, Guimelli & Joule, 2009; Mugny, Souchet, Quiamzade & Codaccioni, 2009). At this point, it can be easily understood that opinions, attitudes or unstable representations are more affected by short-term communication than the formations from higher levels of the architecture; the former are less structured and more fragile than the latter.

<sup>4</sup> Please note that the presented definition of attitude does not refer to mainstream attitude theories (e.g. Crano & Prislin, 2008).

Through public communication means, the diffusion of some opinions and representations that emerge in restricted private contexts are propagated to a larger public, reaching mass proportions in a way that resembles epidemiological propagation; that position was advanced by authors outside the structural approach (Sperber, 1989; Lahlou, 1996), but is certainly compatible with it. Afterwards, once again people deal with what is transmitted by the media in the private sphere, in a cycle that is perhaps only broken in parts for academic investigation and didactic explanation, as each component does not have sense without the other.

In general terms, social thinking directs the acquisition and processing of knowledge on the part of people and collective entities through communication events, dynamically generating, maintaining or transforming each kind of symbolic formation from the architecture. It has been demonstrated by Moscovici (1976) that the diffusion of ideas linked to specific social thinking constructs such as attitudes or stereotypes corresponds to different broad communication configurations, that he called communication systems.

### Final remarks: the study of social logic

From the proposition of a basic structural terminology by Codol (1969), the integration of isolated cognitive operations into social thinking by Rouquette (1973) and the first formulation of central core theory by Abric (1976), the structural approach on social thinking has gained form and sketched a characteristic theoretical body and methodological standards, currently organized around the model of the social thinking architecture. It is based mostly on the study of social representations; other formations still have much to be explored. For example, research on ideologies is still tentative.

It is also important to stress that the understanding that social thinking processes owe their nature to a social component, which is of the utmost importance for the coherence of the whole approach, is to a large extent confined to the domain of essays and hypotheses. For example, the assumptions that the structural characteristics of masses as a sociological and historical phenomenon determined the characteristics of social thinking processes that are known today (Rouquette, 1994b), and the relationships between social communication and social thinking (Rouquette, 1996a, 1996b; Guimelli, 1999) are thoroughly discussed at a theoretical level, but have practically not been verified empirically, and definitely not experimentally. In the case of the origins of social thinking, perhaps such kind of test would not be truly possible, as many of the key concepts and assumptions of the structural approach on

social thinking are situated much closer to a sociological level of analysis than a sociopsychological one, and cannot then be satisfactorily 'translated' to laboratory contexts. Every science owes its directions, at a first instance, to its epistemological bases, and the structural approach on social thinking is clearly a scientific effort aimed at explaining thinking processes as being framed by values that are shared by and negotiated within and between groups, superimposing themselves to individual thinking. Its validity and pertinence in social psychology will depend on the plausibility of its theoretical models in the prediction and explanation of phenomena related to social knowledge and behavior.

The lack of studies addressing communication phenomena looks more problematic. If communication is an essential aspect related to social thinking studies, surpassing theoretical development and incorporating that dimension into more rigorous empirical studies is a necessity. Scholars outside the structural approach are giving great emphasis to the study of interpersonal and dialogical aspects of the social representation phenomenon, acknowledging that failure to address such topics is compromising for related science (Markova, 2003).

Within the structural approach, greater attention to communication has been given so far by studies of social influence that take social representations into account (Mugny *et al.*, 2009; Eyssartier *et al.*, 2009), through research paradigms that introduce communication manipulations to bring about action and representational change. But given the centrality of communication processes that is thoroughly advocated in theoretical essays, the coverage of related phenomena in structural thinking research still leaves much to be desired. Differently from the basic sociological assumptions of the approach, communication processes could be creatively introduced in research paradigms inspired by communication psychology: one could introduce controlled focus groups in experimental conditions, or control the flow and access to information of communication employing notions derived from research from communication networks and ingroup processes, for example.

Most of the empirical studies aligned with the structural approach have focused cognitive processes. While this is understandable, given the inseparable connection of thinking and knowledge, much less attention has been given to other important dimensions of social thinking theories, such as affect and the already mentioned communication processes. Affective and communication phenomena are essential aspects of social thinking and the field has much to gain from investing in related research, which would certainly contribute to differentiate it from other approaches.

Finally, it is pertinent to point out that a recent trend

consists of investigations conducted by researchers aligned with the study of social thinking that include variables related to mainstream social cognition processes (cf. Rateau & Moliner, 2009). As examples of efforts in that line, we can mention developments indicating the existence of conceptual and empirical links concerning intergroup representations and stereotypes, connecting the categorization and representing processes (Moliner & Vidal, 2003; Vidal & Brissaud-Le Poizat (2009), the two directional influences of causal attribution and representing processes (Moliner, 2009), the relationships of social representations with ingroup bias (Tafari & Hagué, 2009), and a contribution of the theories on representation structure to understand persuasion effects based on involvement (Eyssartier, Joule & Guimelli, 2007; Eyssartier *et al.*, 2009).

Trying to understand the links between social cognition and social thinking processes makes sense if one takes into account that social thinking variables do interfere in cognitive processing of information as well as that processing activity itself has characteristics that influence the possibilities of social thinking to take place at a certain degree. Still, it is essential to evaluate carefully if some of the concepts from those different fields are not incompatible with each other, referring to different explanation levels (Doise, 1982); social thinking processes usually refers to intergroup and societal levels, whereas most of social cognition research privileges intra individual and interpersonal ones. Moreover, one also needs to take into account the fact that occasionally there are overlapping constructs in both fields – for example, as Vidal and Brissaud-Le Poizat (2009) discuss, the intersections between intergroup representations and stereotypes is considerable. Eventual conflicts in theoretical and epistemological assumptions should also be assessed, if some kind of fruitful collaboration can be possible.

On the other hand, there is a point of view that understands that the structural approach is no different from conventional social cognition (Parales Quenza, 2005), at least when it comes to the study of social representations conceived as associative networks or schemes. That position raises concerns in terms of the parsimony of adopting the framework of the structural approach; after all, if social cognition and social thinking are the same, then why support an alternative model instead of just refining the social cognitive perspective?

A tentative effort might be in the reformulation of some basic characteristics of the structural perspective, embedding an understanding of social knowledge related to social identity in a more fundamental, normative way in order to differentiate it from individual cognition. This shift might also be allied to a broader understanding of the notion of structure: instead of

restricting it to a structural conception of cognition, one might identify structural regularities in terms of cultural and social variables that are associated with specific instances of social knowledge. A more detailed account of such proposal can be found in Wachelke (2012b). In such perspective, the study of social thinking would actually consist in research dedicated to unveiling general and situated social logic mechanisms, i.e. structural patterns of relations involving social variables and contextual configurations and their connections with knowledge and communication. Referring to a social logic instead of social thinking is helpful to overcome the metaphor of a thinking agent that is closely related to individual subjects, which is misleading if individualistic theoretical models are automatically carried over to collective levels. The structural study of social logic and its relationships with social knowledge would aim at identifying at a social level the causes, explanations or justifications for psychosocial configurations of knowledge.

Whether the study of social thinking will try to integrate its main findings and conceptions with those from social cognition models or choose the path of an emphasis in social logic and communication processes is still unclear. We will need to wait –or make– the next chapters of this story in order to foresee its ending.

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