

Social Representations Theory: Principles, Mechanism and Methodology

Sosyal Temsiller Kuramı: Esasları, İşleyişi ve Yöntemi

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ABSTRACT

Despite its long-standing recognition in Europe, Social Representations Theory (SRT) is represented by a limited number of translated works and theoretical studies in Turkey. Existing empirical research tends to briefly introduce the conceptual framework of the theory without providing in-depth analysis. This study aims to examine the ontological and epistemological foundations of SRT, highlighting its critiques of the mainstream social cognition paradigm in psychology and the alternative approaches it offers. SRT explores how individuals' thoughts, imaginations, and behaviors are shaped through interaction with social processes, offering a distinct perspective and conceptual framework compared to the mainstream social cognition paradigm. In this regard, the study seeks to demonstrate how SRT's social and cognitive analytical framework serves as an effective theoretical tool for understanding societal dynamics and evaluating the issues arising from social changes in modern societies. To this end, the study elaborates on the core assumptions of SRT and the function of the concept of representation, while also introducing two primary research orientations widely accepted in the literature that outline the general operation of social representation studies. In Türkiye, existing studies primarily focus on understanding and explaining discursive conflicts arising from modernization, social changes, and political transformations. However, apart from certain health-related topics, these studies present a fragmented thematic landscape. This study summarizes the applications of SRT in Türkiye, offering a general overview of the field and evaluating the theory's potential contributions.

Keywords: Social, representation, theory, society, description

ÖZ

Avrupa'da uzun süredir tanınmasına rağmen, Sosyal Temsiller Kuramı (STK) Türkiye'de sınırlı sayıda çevrilmiş eser ve teorik çalışma ile temsil edilmektedir. Mevcut ampirik araştırmalar, teorinin kavramsal çerçevesini kısaca tanıtmaya eğiliminde olup derinlemesine analiz sunmamaktadır. Bu çalışma, STK'nın ontolojik ve epistemolojik temellerini incelemeyi, psikolojideki ana akım sosyal biliş paradigmasına yönelik eleştirilerini ve sunduğu alternatif yaklaşımları öne çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. STK, bireylerin düşüncelerinin, hayal güçlerinin ve davranışlarının sosyal süreçlerle etkileşim yoluyla nasıl şekillendiğini araştırarak, ana akım sosyal biliş paradigmasından farklı bir bakış açısı ve kavramsal çerçeve sunar. Bu bağlamda, çalışma, STK'nın sosyal ve bilişsel analitik çerçevesinin, toplumsal dinamikleri anlamak ve modern toplumlardaki sosyal değişimlerden kaynaklanan sorunları değerlendirmek için etkili bir teorik araç olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü göstermeyi hedeflemektedir. Bu amaçla, çalışma, STK'nın temel varsayımlarını ve temsil kavramının işlevini ayrıntılı bir şekilde ele alırken, sosyal temsil çalışmalarının genel işleyişini özetleyen literatürde yaygın olarak kabul gören iki temel araştırma yönelimini de tanıtmaktadır. Türkiye'deki mevcut çalışmalar, ağırlıklı olarak modernleşme, sosyal değişimler ve siyasi dönüşümlerden kaynaklanan söylemsel çatışmaları anlamaya ve açıklamaya odaklanmaktadır. Ancak, belirli sağlıkla ilgili konular dışında, bu çalışmalar parçalı bir tematik manzara sunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'deki STK uygulamalarını özetleyerek, alanın genel bir panoramasını sunmakta ve teorinin potansiyel katkılarını değerlendirmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Sosyal, temsil, kuram, toplum, betimleme

Introduction

Serge Moscovici is a French theoretician who sparked unprecedented debates in social psychology with two important studies. Among these, the minority influence experiments challenged the conformity argument on social influence, previously put forward by Solomon Asch (Moscovici et al. 1969), and eventually via the Conversion Theory demonstrated that majority and minority influence are coexistent social influence processes that simultaneously operate through different mechanisms (Moscovici and Personnaz 1980, Martin and Hewstone 2016). In all of these studies, Moscovici was inspired by a crucial and simple question: If people always conformed to the majority, how would new ideas emerge?

The forbearance shown to minority influence by the social psychology community (see Martin et al. 2008) and its recognition via replication studies, was not the case for his other major contribution to the field: Social Representations Theory (SRT). Due to sometimes destructive criticisms of SRT's conceptual complexity and methodological multiplicity (Jahoda 1988), it is no coincidence that Moscovici has become a 'minority' in the scientific community of which he was a member. This is because, Moscovici (1984) was aware that what he is doing is a revolution. Although he described his theory as a sort of retro-revolution, he was quite comfortable with this designation (Farr 1993). After all, he believed that SRT was returning social psychology to a past when it was much more 'social' than it is now.

Although there are a few works on SRT translated to Turkish (Marková 2004, 2024, Wagner 2004) and reviews, broadly introducing the theory or its concepts (Öner 2002, Cırhınlıoğlu and Aktaş 2004, Üzelgün 2015), the primary goals of its emergence, its ontological and epistemological position, and finally its inspiring explanations of the social system have yet thoroughly conveyed to the Turkish reader (for an exception, see Paker 1999). Therefore, this paper aims to explain how and why SRT diverges from mainstream social psychology with its epistemological preference, how it offers a methodological diversity with an understanding of the social system that differs from the social cognition paradigm, and how its concepts and mechanisms work coherently. Finally, we outline the SRT studies carried out so far in Türkiye.

Imagining a Social Psychology

Although the concept of social representations appeared first in 'La Psychanalyse: Son image et son public' published in 1961 (Moscovici 2008), it is difficult to be precise about the exact date of its establishment as a theory. It is mostly associated with Moscovici and his colleagues' works between 1970 and 1980, yet SRT became more widely recognised and discussed in the English-speaking world by the publication of 'Social Representations: European Studies in Social Psychology' in 1984 (Eicher et al. 2011). It should be noted that the idea of the existence of some common beliefs (i.e. representations) shared among people is not new. For example, Karl Marx's concept of ideology and Emile Durkheim's concept of collective representation assume shared beliefs circulating within society via common sense. The concept of social representation, which was developed on and in close discussion with these notions, turns common sense into the primary research object of social psychology. For SRT, it is not a trivial form of knowledge that needs to be eliminated or cured, but the basic building block that makes the social coexistence of human beings possible and valid (Moscovici 1998).

According to Farr (1993), this manoeuvre locates SRT, along with psychoanalysis, among theories that 'enlarge' the scope of psychology, whereas behaviourism and Gestalt psychology are among those 'restricting' the same. This is because, these theories impoverished the research field of psychology by prioritising perception or behaviour and weakened its methodological diversity by prioritising laboratory experiments. In contrast, SRT has expanded the conceptual framework of the discipline, its research subject and methodological pool by bringing psychology closer to both sociology and anthropology. Moreover, the overrepresentation of health and intergroup relation-related studies in SRT literature is not a result of its conceptual narrowness (Eicher et al. 2011), but of the domination of the traditional North American-centred psychology (Farr 1993). Besides, behaviourism and gestalt approaches, built on the academic reward system that is usually conducted through papers, focus on the individual as the object

of research, either from outside through observable behaviour, or from within through sensible perception. However, both of these approaches from their distinct positions have not been able to construct a unified paradigm (Moscovici and Marková 1988).

On the other hand, as an approach developed mainly through books, SRT goes beyond testing certain hypotheses and proposes not only a new concept, but also a new perspective. For example, in his influential book 'Social Influence and Social Change' Moscovici (1976) shows that the dominant perspective of contemporary psychology is based on a functionalist model, because these studies consider society and social relations as static for and given to the individual. In contrast, following theoreticians like Piaget and Vygotsky, he proposes a genetic model that analyses the genesis of social phenomena and facts in individual-society interaction (Moscovici 1976), which forms the basis of SRT. In this sense, it would be misleading to consider SRT only as a new theory. Instead, it directly begins with new propositions on the limits and boundaries of research topics and areas in social psychology (Moscovici 1988). Accordingly, social psychology should follow a parallel strategy to anthropology, history and sociology in terms of theory and facts. This is because, social psychology cannot pursue a 'perfect' explanation similar to the natural sciences. For example, there is yet to be a consensus on the explanation of concepts such as charisma, collective consciousness, social class or myth. Secondly, in seeking to explain religious, cultural and political phenomena, social psychology must explain the basic principles underlying the transformation from subjective to objective elements. As such, social representation can be a fundamental concept for social psychological interactions in society, just as the market is fundamental for economic change or power is fundamental for relations between large groups of people. Equivalent explanations have been made by the sociology of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim (Moscovici 1988), however, there are differences as well as similarities between Durkheim's 'collective' representations and 'social' representations.

Collective representations are engraved in collective memory through education as relatively fixed frameworks of community life. However, the process of their formation is being pushed outside of social interaction, since it is only attributed to extraordinary conditions. In this sense, Durkheim's collective representations can be considered as abstract and supra-social structures of social interaction (Cirinlioğlu et al. 2004). These abstract representational relations, which might be applicable to the 'closed' communities such as one-party regimes or religious sects, change and transform much faster in today's modern society by the flow of information. Beyond social characteristics that have been influential throughout the 19th century such as religion and ideology, new and dynamic social structures as well as processes are now effective on shared representations (Moscovici 1988). Despite following Durkheim conceptually, this is precisely why Moscovici used the word social instead of collective as a bridge between the individual and the society, and introduced the concept of social representations to encompass intra- and inter-group differentiation (Moscovici 2008). In addition, this formulation covered intrapersonal processes for the first time, and thus, social representation is regarded as a psychic as well as a social reality.

Unlike collective representations, there might be different types of social representations that are shaped in a combination of individual and group, different groups or group and society. Accordingly, there may be hegemonic representations shared by the majority of society, emancipated representations used by various subgroups in a unique way, and polemical representations that emerge through conflict or social struggles (Moscovici 1988, Üzelgün 2015). For example, in their study of the concepts used to depict migration flows and migrants, Deaux and Wiley (2007) show that the concept of 'melting pot' is a hegemonic representation shared by almost everyone in North America. The concept of 'African American' has different meanings for different racial groups such as Blacks, Latinos, Asians or Whites, hence it is an emancipated representation. Finally, they have show that the definition of legal citizenship creates polemics between groups, with some people using the term 'illegal migrants' while others prefer 'undocumented migrants' for the same category of people.

In summary, the change of perspective suggested by the SRT is defended as an attempt to slot the notion of social science into place (Bauer and Gaskell 1999). This is because, it is not a necessity but an obligation that the models explaining social facts and situations should be different from those in the natural sciences. According to the typical explanation model of the German philosopher Franz von Kutschera,

there should be a necessity between the explained condition or facts (i.e., Explanandums) and the explanatory condition or facts (i.e., Explanans, Wagner 1995). However, there is almost always a complex situation in which the phenomenon under investigation can be both explained and explanatory for social psychology, whose research object is human sociality. Therefore, a number of choices and possibilities come to the fore when conducting SRT research, both in terms of the levels of assessment and the spaces of explanation.

Levels of Assessment and Spaces of Explanation

Using the word 'assessment' instead of analysis is not a matter of semantics but the theory for SRT. This is because, determining the method to be used in conducting social scientific research also requires an ontological preference, that is, what the phenomenon under investigation is or could be. With a structuralist perspective on social processes, SRT utilise levels of assessment to distinguish the phenomenon under investigation from the procedures that produce the same. Accordingly, there can be two levels of assessment. The first one is the individual-level of assessment, which includes all social psychological phenomena and concepts related to the 'subjective' realm such as understanding, feeling and willingness. In psychology, issues that are usually examined through concepts such as attitude, perception, intention, emotion and behaviour correspond to this level of assessment. However, individual-level assessments do not only have to be 'personal' attitudes, perceptions, intentions, emotions and behaviours. At the same time, knowledge and beliefs shared among social actors and common knowledge and beliefs within a group are also considered to be part of the individual-level of assessment. The second one, social, cultural or group level of assessment, encompasses the variables observed at the level of the individual but correspond to apriori dynamics of the corporeal world. According to Wagner (1995), what is examined at this level of assessment is the social, cultural and socio-mental ecology under the control of single individuals. For example, social institutions, economic phenomena, norms and ideology are concepts belonging to this level. Although none of these concepts belong to single individuals, individuals are acting as their conveyors or extensions.

In addition to the level at which a social phenomenon can be examined, it is also an important epistemological issue from which 'spaces' information will be obtained to explain the phenomenon under question (Duveen 2013). Although the psychological process of the individual is a prerequisite for the existence of groups and societies, this process cannot be explanatory for the mechanism of high-level phenomena. Wagner (1995) explains this point with the following example:

For the case of aggressive behaviour, the neuropsychological processes in the brain ('low' level fact) usually will not be a valid explanation, whereas references to the personality, affect, intentions and aims of the aggressor will very well be a valid explanation. Equally, the social group of marginalised youths ('high' level fact) will not be a valid explanation, unless it can be shown why and how is this person more aggressive than usual. But it would be explanatory to say that this person is aware of his or her social deprivation and it can be 'legitimately' expressed by hooliganism.

In this example, both individual-level assessment and individual-level explanation (i.e., neuropsychological predisposition to aggression), as well as group-level assessment and individual-level explanation (i.e., social predisposition to aggression) are discussed. However, in both conditions, the spaces of explanation are not sufficient to properly assess the phenomenon. Therefore, Wagner (1995) refers to the awareness of deprivation with an individual-level assessment and suggests a social-level explanation via the justification of hooliganism. As this example shows, in conducting social psychological research, it is vital for the researcher to be aware of both the levels of assessment and the spaces of explanation to be able to secure the relationship between the obtained findings and the social reality.

Epistemologically, SRT holds a social position for explanatory conditions and an individual position for explained phenomena (Duveen 2013). In other words, it tries to assess the individual-level facts and conditions by addressing the social-level explanatory facts and conditions. In this sense, SRT seeks for macro-reductive explanations. However, according to Harré's (1980) taxonomic priority thesis, the relationship between macro conditions and micro phenomena is not symmetrical. This is because,

individual behaviour does not have the power to determine a particular social condition, while they only make sense in the social conditions of which they are a part. Therefore, social phenomena firstly must be transformed into meaningful mental entities among individuals to explain individuals' behaviour.

Sociogenesis and Cognitive Universe

The social cognition paradigm, relying on the Cartesian dualism established between mind and body since Descartes, recognises people as rational subjects with the capacity to process stimuli and information from the 'external' world. Thus, the influence of society, culture or common sense on the individual is often seen as biased, distorting and disruptive of rationality (Reicher 2001). For example, as of today, there are more than 170 cognitive 'biases' identified in this literature. Moreover, for this approach, an average person is a 'cognitive miser' who cannot be free from social constraints and cognitive biases (Moscovici 1998). As a result of its macro-reductionist assumption, SRT proposes new propositions about our mental process. And these propositions differ significantly from both in terms of conceptualisations of the research subject, and the spaces of explanation that can be derived from the social cognition paradigm, which is still mainstream in psychology.

According to Duveen and De Rosa (1992), the available socio-cognitive position interprets social knowledge acquisition as a functional result of incrementally developing psychological structures and mechanisms around the social phenomena, in other words, the stages of cognitive development. Based on the Genetic Social Psychology model proposed by Moscovici as an alternative to functionalism, SRT claims that children develop their social knowledge within the social representations of the community in which they grow up as prospective members (Moscovici 1998). According to this model, explained in detail by Duveen and Lloyd (1990), relative stability in the function of social organisation requires a certain structure, and the realisation of this function requires a certain organisation of this structure. Thus, in the course of social interaction, both the supposedly stable structures and their functions are created and modified through negotiation. In this way, even supposedly stable 'structures' are explained as temporary states of affairs dependent on consensus throughout the historical period. Therefore, the matters of representation, sociogenesis and valorisation come to the forefront in SRT, rather than mind, cognition and concept development: A representation is common sense knowledge shared by the community; sociogenesis corresponds to the process of formation of representations during individual-group-society interactions over time; finally, along with the content, the organisation of representations aligning to social hierarchy and the attribution of certain values to those representations is explained by the valorisation process (Duveen 2013).

In that sense, SRT can be considered as a critical position towards the social cognition paradigm, rather than being an alternative theory that ignores the existence cognitive structures of human. This is because both approaches assume 'structures', waiting to be discovered, that determine our mental process. However, SRT holds an interactionist perspective that emphasises social organisations such as groups, communities and cultures, whereas social cognition holds an individualistic perspective that emphasises interpersonal relationships. Thus, while social cognition regards the child as a 'rational', 'naïve scientist' pursuing cognitive economy, SRT regard the same as a 'social actor' in everyday life. The social cognition paradigm is driven by questions of how and why, while SRT focuses on the question of what.

In their article discussing this issue, Duveen and De Rosa (1992) compare the development of the concept of 'bank', well-known in economic socialisation studies and popular in the social cognition literature, between both approaches. The concept of a bank, according to the social cognition paradigm is the most advanced form of economic relations, becomes increasingly complex in a linear manner during development, starting from the first stage when the children see their parents as a material resource, to the idea of a bank develops, as we know it, and finally become abstract to be established in childrens' mind. However, it was shown in an SRT-oriented study, that when pictures of men and women were shown to even 3- to 5-year-old children, they stated that men are paid more. Moreover, the difference in salaries reported by boys was higher than that reported by girls. Similarly, in a study with 3- to 12- years-old children showed that children anticipated 'dominant' and 'powerful' occupations (e.g. doctors, engineers) to receive

higher salaries (Emler et al. 1990). These results make it clear that social hierarchy is internalised through social representations even when our concepts of economics are still 'immature'.

To summarise, while the social cognition paradigm claims that our concepts about society develop first in form and then in content, SRT does not assume an apriori differentiation between form and content. This is because, according to SRT knowledge is never neutral, it is always 'saturated' with values (Duveen and De Rosa 1992). Valorisation therefore precedes conceptualisation in SRT. The way in which social representations create a context for social knowledge with a historical background and valorise its content is explained with a three-stage mechanism: (1) Sociogenesis, in which social representations are socially transmitted in the *longue durée*; (2) Ontogenesis, in which the individual is exposed to social representations prevalent among the cultural/social community into which they are born; and (3) Microgenesis, in which social representations change and transform during interpersonal interaction and communication. In this system, microgenesis functions as engine enabling the circulation of social representations, namely sociogenetic cycle, starting from the individual and spreading to cultural structures and collective memory. For example, through a multi-layered analysis of data obtained via non-verbal methods such as drawing, Jodelet (1991) has shown how social representation of madness is related to and shaped by the concepts derived from historical figures such as 'fantastic' (sociogenesis), societal threats such as 'deviant' (ontogenesis), and personal attributes such as 'illness' (microgenesis).

Function of Social Representations

So far, we have explained how social representations play a role in the mechanism of the social system and how they are being changed and transformed. The fact that social representations operate as explanatory phenomena in social psychology, like atoms in physics, genes in biology or classes in sociology, is not in opposition to or in conflict with Durkheim's collective representations concept (Moscovici 1988). On the contrary, it is safe to say that Moscovici tried to understand the mechanism of collective representations and render them more dynamic by adapting them to these days. At this point, the question of the 'function' of social representations arises: Why do we need social representations, especially when we already have concepts such as attitudes or ideology?

According to Moscovici, the main function of social representations is to enable us to cope with the unfamiliar or the strange and to familiarise ourselves with new phenomena and situations (Fine 1987). Social representations may emerge from intellectual or cognitive needs or 'substitutes' in people's minds, or from practical needs, including collective rituals and movements. In this sense they shape the social consciousness of a period, class or nation (Moscovici 1988). Yet, this shaping is not direct and linear, because there is a great difference between representations conceived at the interindividual level and the level of individual and group interactions (i.e. social consciousness). Besides being different, they are still related. This is because individuals do not only convey related social representations at different levels, but also, they can shape and change them. However, this relationship does not presuppose a rational human mind as the social cognition paradigm does. According to Moscovici (1988), by ignoring the different levels of interactions mentioned above, social psychologists generally make an important mistake when they look at cognitive phenomena in everyday life. For instance, from the individual-level, it might be possible to measure what is right or wrong, normal or abnormal. This is because every community, including scientists, always has criteria or definitions for what is true, normal or real. But the same logic cannot be applied to groups, cultures and societies. Such logic would lead to absurd judgements like 'wars or massacres are the result of individual mistakes' or 'concentration camps are the result of Hitler's personal ambitions.'

From this point of view, the second premise of the proposal for a perspective change in SRT becomes clear. For SRT, communication is not only the expression of thoughts and feelings. As an agent, communication is instrumental and even ritualistic, that is communication within a community also makes the existence of this community possible. Therefore, neither on a social nor psychological level, there can be a 'reality', that is merely an image or is independent of the person who creates the representation. The dichotomy established by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin on 'ideas about the world and ideas in

the world' is also utilised by Moscovici (Moscovici 1988). According to him, people who represent their entity as a community also represent themselves as individuals. In this sense, a 'mental state' shared by the community is not just about sharing it, because the representation of this mental state is transmitted, shaped, embodied and eventually objectified by the community.

Social representations make things 'real' in two ways. Firstly, they do so in a performative way by being shared, and secondly, in a constructive way in which they select and associate objects and persons. To give one example, Freud's distinction between 'primary' processes such as primitive, mystical thought or dreams and 'secondary' processes such as rational or analytical thinking, later fed into the assumption of specialised regions based on the right and left hemispheres of the brain, which today is widely accepted in society as the 'logic vs. emotion' dichotomy and even a simplified 'heart-brain' dualism (Moscovici 1988). Undoubtedly, very few of these convictions are correct. However, the social representations created with this knowledge have spread throughout society, creating reality at various levels and satisfying the need for familiarisation of complex scientific knowledge.

What Explains Social Representations or what do Social Representations Explain?

Although many works are attempting to define social representations (Duveen and De Rosa 1992, Farr 1993, Fraser 1994, Wagner 1995), it is not straightforward to find a generally accepted and agreed definition. Following Moscovici's (2008) initial study, different dimensions of social representations have been prioritised in the literature and it has become difficult to find consistency among the definitions. This situation has been subjected to various criticisms and raised the following argument: A concept without a clear definition is not suitable for scientific research (Jahoda 1988). After all, social representations are not 'a quiet thing' (Howarth 2006). Depending on the choices to be made regarding the levels of assessment and spaces of explanation elaborated above, the definition of social representations may change along with their content.

To understand the levels of assessment and spaces of explanation to which social representations correspond, it may be helpful to think through the schema proposed by Wagner (1995). Starting from the lower right corner of the figure and counterclockwise (Figure 1), individual thoughts and actions cause people to experience everyday objects and facts in a certain way, and thus, explain them. On the other hand, these social objects and facts do not consist only of individual experience. These experiences make sense to individuals only because they are reflections of certain social conditions. Such social conditions and conflicts, in turn, are represented at the level of collective discourse and explain the major narratives that are either in conflict or in consensus. And finally, collective discourses also give rise to individual thoughts and actions, since they demarcate the boundaries of knowable information. Thus, social representations can be included in the assessment as explanandums and explanans, depending on the level of assessment and the spaces of explanation to be favoured in an SRT research, and thus their operational definition can change accordingly.

We can refer to, what Pierre Bourdieu calls, 'structural uniformity' for a social-level assessment. That is, even if individuals in a society are very different in terms of their personality traits, their thinking and behaviour as well as the basic structure of their social experiences may be similar. These similarities also explain shared social representations through relations at the level of collective discourse, such as common language and rationalisation mechanisms. Thus, social representations can be explained (i.e., Explanandum), since it is social conditions that can cause common and shared representations that go beyond individual thought and behaviour within the sociogenesis cycle. For example, in their study of the relationship between the notion of nature among workers and the social structure of the organisations they are working in, Bloor and Bloor (1982) identified different types of organisations, such as individualistic, cliquish and submissive. They found that the notions of nature among the workers in these organisations were not distributed according to the universities they attended or their technical backgrounds, but to the types of institutions they worked in, i.e. the social constraints they were exposed

to. For example, those working in the individualistic type of organisation understand nature as disorderly, unregulated and revealing its secrets only to knowledgeable people using the right methods.

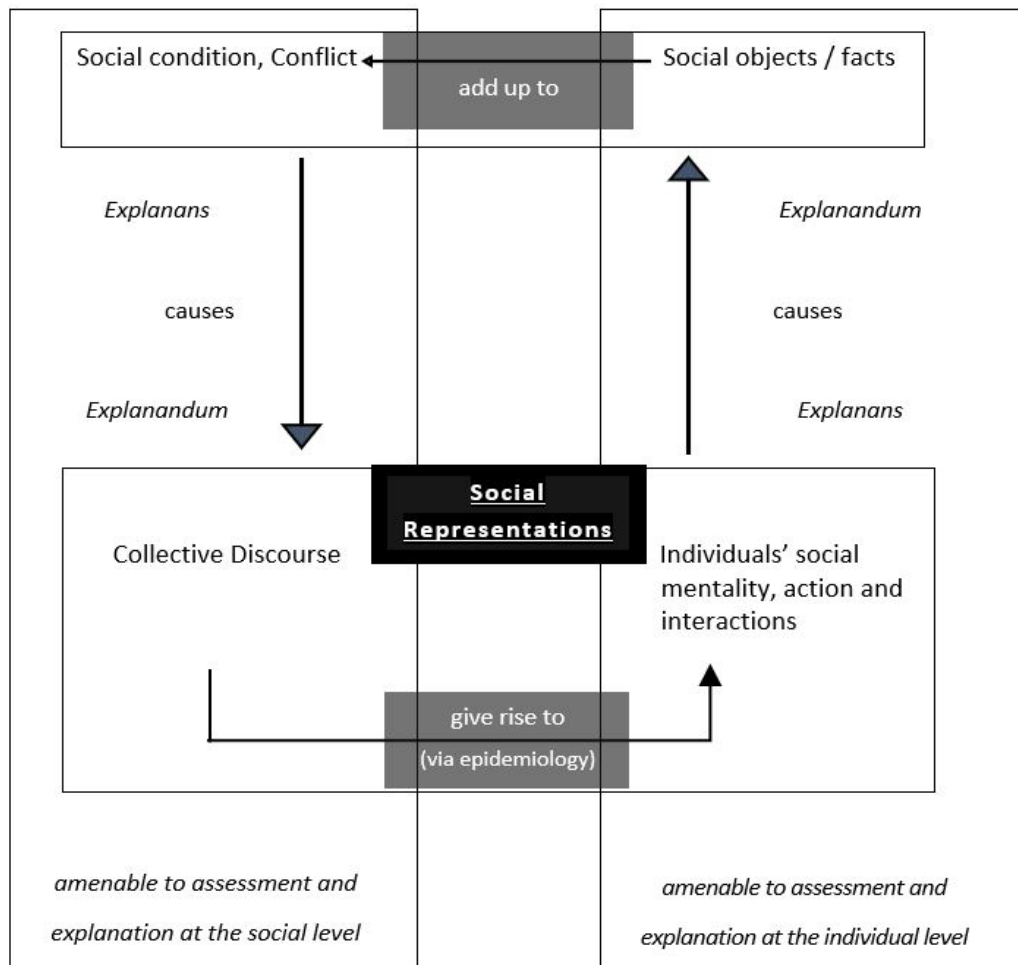


Figure 1. Schematic relationship between the level of assessment and the spaces of explanation in social representations (Wagner 1995)

On the other hand, social representations can also be considered as explanatory (i.e., Explanans) of our thoughts and beliefs regarding a particular social object or phenomenon. Certain social representations formed by the structures, that make the functioning of a social organisation possible, may well shape the thoughts and behaviour of the members of that organisation. Thus, social representations can be also used for an individual-level assessment. For example, Thommen et al. (1988) first asked a group of psychotherapists what the correct professional attitude towards patients and colleagues should be and documented their social representations. Later when participants' therapeutic behaviour was observed and examined, they found that behavioural therapists focused more on temperament, information processing and goals, whereas non-directive therapists made interventions and attributions focusing on expectations and desires. That is, the therapists were acting in accordance with what their dictated occupational integrity, that is, their representations of profession.

These examples show that social representations are not constructs that can be regarded as dependent or independent variables in a pure positivistic sense. Nevertheless, they can be both explanatory of behaviour and beliefs, and also take the position of those explained, determined by social structures. On the one hand, social representation can have logical or analytical consequences that epistemologically determine a particular behaviour, but not empirical or synthetic consequences of a rational disposition. On the theoretical ground, however, there is a logical equivalence between representations whose content

is derived from verbal data and data derived from overt behaviour. For this, we need to accept that these two types of data, i.e. verbal utterances and behaviour, are different instances of the same representational content. This seemingly complex situation is actually quite simple according to Wagner (1995). For example, to be a rational subject in public, our behaviour needs to be both logically justified and legitimated by beliefs. Otherwise, we would be seen as 'stupid' or 'irrational'. This is why, overt behaviour is part of social representation, since the outcome of any behaviour has to be explained within the representation-action complex. Wagner (1995) gives an insightful example of this:

For example, let us imagine that we assess the collective structure and content of representation of 'protest' with the different groups participating in the protest. And at this level, what is the 'object' of this representation? Is it the protest itself? Or is it the event that led to the protest? Most probably we might say that the object is the protest and its reasons. But then what is the 'protest'? ... Hence, the object being represented did not exist before the representation was formed and became enacted on a collective level.

This example shows us the irreducibility of the social representational complex, which combines symbolic, mental and behavioural elements and which only in a meaningful holistic way allows the emergence of its own object.

How do Social Representations Work?

Generally speaking, we affirmed that social representations serve to unfamiliarise situations and phenomena that are unfamiliar to us (Moscovici 1984). With this function, it identifies new situations and phenomena with the existing representations in society and ensures their dissemination. Therefore, it is safe to say that social representations emerge mostly during social changes or after important events that concern the whole society. When a group or an existing representation undergoes change, the need to make sense of the crisis increases as well as the need to communicate and explain it. From this point of view, we can assert that SRT has tried to familiarise or make sense of the social transformation following the 19th century with a new concept such as social representations derived from Durkheim's concept of collective representations. In fact, in his discussion to justify the transition from collective representations to social representations, Moscovici (1988) makes an analogy for the 19th century social system that Durkheim was mainly preoccupied with. He resembles the 19th century with a whale that has turned into an island because it has been asleep for a long time. He argues that the 20th century in which we are living is taking place upon this whale, who has been awakened by the campfire on its back and is moving frantically. However, realising these complex changes or explaining the new with old concepts at the individual or social-level is not straightforward.

According to SRT, the way in which representations work can only be considered as a process. Therefore, familiarisation requires mechanisms such as Anchoring and Objectification (Moscovici 1984, Öner 2002). Anchoring is defined as reducing strange ideas or odd phenomena to ordinary categories and images. In order to do this, we resort to methods such as classification and naming and strategies such as generalisation or specialisation (Paker 1999, Cırhınlıoğlu et al. 2004). For example, we categorise a characteristic of a stranger or an 'Other' according to a previously defined category anchored in the social hierarchy (poor, crazy, elite etc.) and generalise this characteristic to that person. In naming, we ensure that the New is included in the novel vocabulary of the society and given a place in the matrix of social identities. As a result, the named things take on certain characteristics and acquire an appropriate position among people who share the same tradition (Paker 1999, Öner 2002).

The objectification mechanism serves to make sense of an abstract phenomenon by reducing it to the physical world. For example, Moscovici's abovementioned whale analogy is a classic example of objectification used to make sense of the abstract and complex social transformation from the 19th to the 20th century. Jost (1992) gives particular importance to this seemingly simple objectification mechanism. According to him, objectification, one of the functions of social representations explained from Moscovici's early work, asks a critical question: What happens to scientific knowledge as it is transferred from experts to society? The answer is that conceptual frameworks, which were 'assumptions' for experts, are accepted as social or scientific 'facts' in society, as a result of the objectification process to familiarise the

unfamiliar. In this sense, the ontological realism discussed in the philosophy of science is being appropriated to the public from the experts dealing with science. That is, the theories produced by scientists with the assumption of an ontological reality are transformed into social realities in society through social representations, and thus the public also takes an ontological realist position (Jost 1992). We have previously exemplified that the distinction between primary and secondary processes, which was an ontological 'reality' for Freud, turns into a social reality for the masses in society. Based on this example, it can be concluded that the masses are less sceptical or more realist than Freud, at least ontologically.

Is the public really less sceptical than scientists? What does the difference between society and scientists mean? Through psychoanalysis, Moscovici (2008) has shown that scientific knowledge is anchored and objectified in different ways in French society, undergoing changes in Communist, Catholic and Urban-Liberal milieus. This foundational work was followed by studies analysing the circulation and integration of expert knowledge in different public spheres (Fine 1987, Bauer and Gaskell 1999, Wagner et al. 1999). These studies show that scientific knowledge cannot construct a material reality beyond a social representation shared by a particular social group of scientists (Moscovici and Vignaux 2000). Thus, the focus of our question has shifted from the science-society or scientist-ordinary people dichotomy to the different 'publicities' of science. In other words, we can say that each group, including scientists, tries to understand new knowledge by acting within their own common sense and social representations.

At this point, it may be possible to think of representations as 'fiction' or to suspect its structure that 'blurs' reality. Similarly, we can think of the Marxist concept of false consciousness, the negative critique of the Frankfurt school, or postmodern criticism to reject the grand narratives, which are modern versions of the iconoclastic suspicion that express a 'false image' of our existence in the world throughout the history of philosophy. By relying on a weaker version of such scepticism, the SRT takes a more justifiable and appropriate position, emphasising the difference between 'adequate and inadequate' representations (Bauer and Gaskell 1999). This is because, unlike things that are objects per se, representations are a product of reflection and a precondition for iconoclastic scepticism. Reflection makes it possible to experience alternatives, that is to engage with conflicting representations about a commonality. Just as in the case of minority influence, underestimated and conflicting representations challenge the dominant representation. The harsh facts about the world - our categorical perceptions in harmony with others, our symbols, and our customised and habitual behaviour - are formed by the fixation of certain social representations. In this way, the difference in the level of ontological realism between the public and scientists is now explained as a result of the social system. To summarise, while the knowledge used by the masses consists of relatively more stable social representations, the social representations among scientists circulate in their communities of experts are more dynamic and rapid.

Bauer and Gaskell (1999) propose a model to justify and explain this general process. As the smallest unit of representation, a triad consisting of S1 and S2 subjects and an object (S-O-S). is described in this model to simplify the communication system of social representations. When the dimension of time and space is added to the relationship between these three elements, a geometric shape similar to the Toblerone chocolate bar emerges. As a result, the space formed between - at least - two people at a certain time (t) and a certain place can be considered as the social representation of an object (S1t-Ot-S2t). However, social representations always involve a group process, so that, representations of an object can exist and be in conflict across certain milieus in the same time. According to Bauer and Gaskell (1999) the milieu is the functional domain of representations. Within the milieus, representations are expressed through one or more of four different modes: habitual behaviour, individual cognition, formal and informal communication. All these modes are related to language and therefore there are also different mediums through which representations are expressed. For example, habitual behaviour can be expressed through body language or individual cognition, while formal and informal communication can be expressed through words, visual images or non-linguistic signals. Therefore, depending on the question and problem of the researcher, conducting social representation research necessitates determining the milieu as the social environment for the object, the modes in which representations are expressed and the mediums to be used for this purpose. For example, Thommen et al. (1988), used psychotherapists as the milieu of their

research, professional behaviour and formal communication as the modes of expression, and finally, the everyday language was the medium of the social representation they examined.

How to Conduct a Social Representation Research?

Essentially, the criticism towards SRT is the lack of a common theoretical ground despite the methodological diversity in the studies (Jahoda 1988, Potter 1996, Flick et al. 2015). However, according to Sotirakopoulou and Breakwell (1992), social representations inherently require a broad perspective on both individual-level constructs such as beliefs and explanations, psychological constructs such as attitudes and emotions, and macro-level constructs due to the relationship between ideology and representation. Therefore, depending on the problem and question of the researchers, the method(s) to be chosen can be various and eclectic. Apart from this, there is also methodological confusion since social representations require analysis through linguistic and communicative tools due to processes that necessitates meaning, structure and image. Therefore, in the study of social representation, researchers should be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of each method and, if necessary, adjust the methods to compensate for the shortcomings of one another (Flick et al. 2015, Rubira-García et al. 2018).

In SRT literature, the macro-reductionist assumption manifests itself in two general methodological orientations. The first is the examination of social representations shared among members of a particular social group or milieu, and the second is the examination of social representations as collective processes or discursive products. In the first case, researchers interested in the distributed properties of social representations usually identify a group as homogeneous as possible and make assessments at the individual-level (Wagner 1995). The social representations obtained this way are common elements of individually distributed prototypical representations. Here, the obtained prototypical elements serve to understand what plays a 'central' and what plays a 'peripheral' role in the content of a particular representation, that is, the structure of the representation (for detailed information on this approach, known as the constructivist school, see Abric 1993, Rubira-García et al. 2018). For example, Jodelet's (1991) research on 'madness' among French peasants is one such study, as peasants constitute a specific subgroup among the general population (i.e. milieu), due to their traditional lifestyle and close contact with the disabled person. Indeed, her findings show that peasants make sharp distinctions between brain and nerve, innate or accidental 'madness', which is not observed in the general population.

In the second methodological orientation, researchers interested in the overarching and common features of social representations, usually conduct document and media analyses or surveys by identifying an object that can be examined for the entire society. The social representations obtained from this method are known as the collective view of social representation. For example, in his study on the social representation of psychoanalysis, Moscovici (2008) aimed to collectively reveal the understandings among different milieus in French society. Here, we have a large society of social groups with different ideologies using different mass media channels such as Communist, Catholic and Urban-Liberal. Although each milieu has its prototypical representations, a collective image of psychoanalysis in society has been obtained as a result of shared, intersecting and ultimately interrelated knowledge and discourses.

Although there are eclectic studies in the literature spanning across this spectrum of these two methodological orientations and coming from different schools of thought (Flick et al. 2015, Rubira-García et al. 2018), the main objective for all is to examine the transformation of characteristics of a particular community into shared, interindividual characteristics. Nevertheless, what determines methodological preferences and trends is the differentiation in analytical strategy that begins with the choice of research topic due to the nature of social representations. Researchers decide how to define a social representation, where to collect data and information, and finally, which method(s) to be used, in relation to the following three aspects: (1) the subjects or conveyers of the representation, (2) a concrete entity or an abstract idea as the object of representation, (3) the pragmatic context or project of a social group in which the representation makes sense (Bauer and Gaskell 1999). The researcher needs to be aware of this three-polar structure before going into the field, since this ontological space allows for the representation of things or ideas that are even not geographically or temporally present. For example, 'objects' that are

invisible, imperceptible, from the past or in the form of future expectations can also have social representation.

Table 1. Leading questions for social representation research	
1. Defining Social Representation	
a. Determining the Level of Assessment	
i. Does the content of social representations include only individuals' beliefs, thoughts or behaviours?	> Individual-level
ii. Does the content of social representations also include the function, ideology and discourses of groups or communities?	> Social-level
b. Determining the Space of Explanation	
i. Are representations and their relationships with their antecedents or variables that shape them being analysed?	> Representation as <i>Explanandums</i>
ii. Are representations and their relations with the behaviours or discourses they determine being examined?	> Representation as <i>Explanans</i>
2. Demarcating the Context	
a. Are there any self-referential groups or groups with a common trajectory who use representations?	> Milieu
b. How are the representations being expressed in these groups?	> Mod
c. Which communicative means are used to circulate representations within the group?	> Medium
3. Deciding the Methodological Orientation	
a. Does the study aim to show the formation and change of representations in society?	> Sociogenesis: Usually Longitudinal or Ethnographic studies
b. Does the study aim to show the existing representations and their circulation in society?	> Ontogenesis: Usually Media and Document Analysis or Opinion Polls
c. Does the study aim to show the representations and their structure being discussed inter-individually?	> Microgenesis: Usually Interview, Survey or Experimental Designs

Another important point in social representation studies is the determination of the sample and the categories to be analysed. According to Bauer and Gaskell (1999), taxonomic clusters such as age and gender generally cannot be accepted as milieus. Because such groups are analytical categories and created by the researcher. As a matter of fact, a group consisting only of age or gender does not exist in society albeit in a few exceptional cases. Assessments of such groups should be avoided unless they have a special significance for the prevalence and epidemiology of social representations. For a social cluster to have analytical value for social representation research (i.e. to be considered a milieu), there are two possibilities: They are either (1) self-referential groups, i.e. milieus who can define themselves (e.g. Catholics, environmental activists, etc.), (2) groups with a common trajectory and shared knowledge, experiences and practices (e.g. young mothers with children). The issue of dividing society into communities or clusters is an important part of the research and should be decided based on analytical legitimations rather than 'taken for granted' assumptions.

Based on the discussion so far, now it is clear that it is difficult to follow a standardised procedure or predetermined methodological steps for social representation research. Moreover, this issue is one of the most important criticisms to the SRT (Voelklein and Howarth 2005). While methodological diversity offers an overall fruitful toolkit considering the scope of the theory (Wagner et al. 1999), some preferences become prominent derived from different schools of thought and approaches arising through debates within the theory (Flick et al. 2015, Rubira-García et al. 2018). Still, based on this general picture and through the ontological and epistemological issues discussed in this paper, some leading questions can be asked to provide insights for social representation researchers. Without being binding and mutually exclusive, the answers to the questions provided in Table 1 and consequent informed decisions can facilitate focusing on one or more of the existing methodological orientations in the literature before starting the research.

Social Representation Studies in Türkiye

Up until today, considerable literature on social representations has emerged in Türkiye. Although the early studies were mostly graduate theses (Övgün 1994, Paker 2000), the number of published works increased in the following years, diversifying both in terms of content and methodology. For instance, interest in the subject is expanding beyond psychology to communication sciences such as advertising and journalism. Nevertheless, it is possible to categorise existing social representation studies in Türkiye in terms of their methodological orientation and themes. Here, we review published empirical studies from a psychological or sociological perspective, using the SRT framework with a sample from Türkiye. Except for the abovementioned two theses, since they are the first studies on social representation in Türkiye, unpublished theses, studies from communication sciences, international relations, and geography as well as review articles are not included in this assessment.

The first general tendency is to conduct research inspired by the classics in the literature, aiming at a collective view of social representations in the field of health. For example, Narter (2003) analysed the social representations of madness in Türkiye through discourse analysis of daily newspapers and interviews with people from different demographic backgrounds. Following this first study, a line of research has been established on issues such as the social representations of health and illness (Narter 2004), psychoanalysis (Narter 2012, 2017), the concept of psychopathy (Zümrüt et al. 2020), and hyperactivity (Özalp et al. 2024). These studies take into account not a specific milieu but the entire society by assessing the language used in the media and common sense-based conversations in a combination. In general, these studies show that scientific knowledge and discourse have begun to diffuse into society and to influence -sometimes even determine- common sense knowledge, defining social realities about health in Türkiye (Jost, 1992). Rather than health but with a similar methodological orientation, other studies are also being conducted focusing on concepts and objects around controversial issues such as modernisation and military tutelage in Türkiye. For example, Bulut (2008) analysed the social representation of 'moral laws' (Töre) through content analysis of daily newspapers. Gender in novels (Yılmaz and Öner-Özkan 2018), military service in daily conversations (Sayılan 2019) or the faces of 'Turkish citizenship' in social media (Sandal-Önal and İslambay-Yapalı 2024) are other important topics conducted with this methodological orientation. Finally, some studies use text-based social media (Ekşisözlük) and similar platforms that compile the opinions of anonymous persons as data sources. Researchers use these platforms as a source of common sense knowledge (Bilgin, 2011). For example, Özdemir and Öner-Özkan (2016) analyse the general picture of common understanding towards Syrian refugees based on these platforms. Similarly, Balcı and Korkmaz (2020) analyse social representations of a sensitive topic, 'post-mortem mourning' by using these platforms since they allow anonymity for the participants.

Another tendency in line with the literature is to focus on specific milieus in Türkiye and to analyse the prototypical elements of representations distributed among individuals. For example, in his pioneering study, Paker (2000) assessed university students' representations of religion and secularism through focus group interviews, revealing the conflicting relationship between religious belief and modern values. Although this study highlights polemical and conflictual elements, all in all it shows that religion and the Islamic faith are drifting from the public sphere to the private sphere among young people (Paker 2010). In other studies focusing on young people, Şah (2011) examines the social representations of sexual orientation among university students using content analysis, Çetin and Asıl (2018) with a similar group examine the social representations of crisis using the word association method, and Bayad et al. (2020) examine the social representations of peace among secondary school students by combining both of these methods. Another line of research focusing on young people is to analyse the representational associations through visual materials. For example, in their large-sample study, Peker-Dural et al. (2018) examine the East-West representations of university students with the cognitive mapping method. For all of these studies, young people are deemed important because they are a group potentially open to change and new ideas, and since they form a milieu based on peers through the formal education system, even though they are also under the influence of their families. Apart from youth, some studies focus on different milieus with a similar methodological orientation. For example, Aktaş et al. (2004) analyse representations of justice and legal system through occupational groups. By clustering their participants

into two groups, those who are lawyers and the others, they have shown that having a legal education affects the prototypical elements in the representation of justice. Paker (2012) assesses understanding of social science by focusing on academics in the very same fields, using a survey method and content analysis. Finally, in their research on the representations of prison, Karasu et al. (2024), cluster people who are prisoners, non-prisoners or relatives of prisoners in three groups and examine the effects of people's environmental experiences on the representation in question.

Finally, a third tendency among social representation studies in Türkiye is focusing on methodology. For example, Şahsuvaroğlu and Ekşi (2013) analyse the advantages and disadvantages of the focus group interview technique in researching the phenomenon of social representation. Similarly, Üzelgün (2015) argues that the argument analysis enables a more holistic picture in social representation studies and explains this method via examples. Finally, Kuşdil and Çavuşoğlu (2023) propose to establish a link between memory and social representation by highlighting the importance of studying the representations activated to encode into the collective memory through the case of earthquake trauma (see also Çavuşoğlu et al. 2021).

Conclusion

More than explaining a single psychological mechanism, SRT has offered a new perspective and proposed a new set of concepts as well as methods to investigate social psychological processes thanks to the ontological and epistemological foundations on which it is built upon (Moscovici 1984, Jahoda 1988, Moscovici 1998). Therefore, the phenomenon of social representation, develops and operates through the mediation of cognitive processes and social facts, can be used as a fruitful tool for linking macro- and micro structures in modern world characterised by rapid social and political changes (Duveen and De Rosa 1992, Jost 1992, Farr 1993, Bauer and Gaskell 1999). Moreover, it offers methodological diversity due to its flexibility in terms of focusing on entire society or on a specific milieu, the level of assessment and spaces of explanation, and the interactionist nature of the sociogenesis mechanism (Harré 1980, Sotirakopoulou and Breakwell 1992, Wagner 1995, Flick et al. 2015, Rubira-García et al. 2018). A similar diversity is also observed in the methodologic tendencies and thematic foci in Türkiye (Narter 2017). When all of these studies, conducted on various topics, with different groups and using different methods are considered together, we can conclude that SRT research is aiming to understand the discursive or rhetorical discrepancies and conflicts emerging during the popularisation of modernisation and political changes in Türkiye. Despite this commonality and the methodological intersections between existing studies, with the exception of studies on health, the thematic foci of studies are generally fragmented or separated. This is understandable, considering first studies dating back only the early 2000s. However, if future studies continue to complement or deepen the existing knowledge by regarding the existing Turkish literature, it would be beneficial for both the recognition of SRT and accumulation of scientific knowledge in Türkiye.

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