



Meeting 1

Social representations and the role of shared group beliefs

Let me start today's class with an introduction to the idea of **social representations**. **Serge Moscovici** coined the term, and he described it as the system of values, beliefs, and practices. They help to establish an order that will enable a person to orientate him or herself in his or her chaotic material and social world, **understand and control this world, and evaluate it on a good/bad dimension**.

They also influence people's perception of what other people think, that is, what becomes a social consensus on important issues and how society understands social phenomena. Moreover, social representations enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a shared code for social exchange and for naming and classifying various aspects of the current world and the group's history. Often, the interpretations of the facts and history described by the social representations predominant in one's group **are only perceived as true because they are shared among members of this group and not because they possess objective evidence**.

Social representations and lay theories related to technologies **may also affect social trust, especially trust in the government and the decisions politicians make**. In previous studies, researchers found, for example, that those individuals who exhibited lower levels of trust in government believed there was greater risk associated with nuclear power plant accidents. Similar studies in Canada showed that

Important works by Moscovici:

Moscovici, S. (1961). *La psychanalyse, son image et son public*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Moscovici, S. (1963). Attitudes and opinions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 14, 231-260.

Moscovici, S. (1988). Notes towards a description of Social Representations. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 18, 211-250.

confidence in the government's actions was negatively associated with perceived risks associated with radiation.

Social representations:

the system of values, beliefs, and practices that help people to orientate him or herself in his or her chaotic material and social world, understand and control this world, and evaluate it on a good/bad dimension.

When it comes to investigating the relationship between social representations and risk perception, one could cite **Robin Goodwin's** works. He highlighted that social representations play **important social functions in managing and justifying actions and beliefs**. They help explain, for example, often seemingly "irrational" views on infectious diseases that individuals and whole communities present. In fact, **social representations help people to explain all sorts of complex phenomena and new technologies by anchoring them within the existing knowledge and stereotypes**. This, in turn, might be a cause for the formation of new social problems, affect the reception of awareness campaigns, or distort and impede discussions on the advantages and disadvantages of technologies.

Shared group beliefs also affect the way people discuss important issues and solve social problems. For example, research on information-sharing shows us an answer to the question of why members of groups fail to share information effectively. Studies repeatedly show that when people have information of two kinds - the first being information that is only available to them and the second information that is shared among group members - **people tend to bring up arguments based on information that members hold in common before discussion**. So the answer to the question of why members of groups fail to share information effectively is **biased information sampling**. That is, group members often fail to effectively pool and share their information because **discussion tends to be dominated by (a) information that members held in common before discussion and (b) information that supports members' preferences**.

When people base their evaluations of social objects, issues, events, or technologies on the information that their group members hold in common, this can have important social consequences. Because all of us live in some kind of information or filter bubble, we tend to befriend people who have similar views, so we get **more information that supports our side of the discussion**. We base our evaluations and decisions on biased information-sampling. This could lead to the false consensus effect: people think that most people think similarly

Book on information bubble in the age of the Internet and search engines:

Pariser, E. (2011). The filter bubble: what the Internet is hiding from you. New York: Penguin Press.

to them, which can lead to radicalization of attitudes and social polarization.

Information bubbles have an effect on the **cognitive frames** we use to interpret issues, people, and objects. Many studies show the importance of the framing effect in understanding distortions in individuals' perceptions of social life. We will discuss this during the next meeting.

Recommended future readings:

Christidiou, V., Dimopoulos, K., & Koulaidis, V. (2004). Constructing social representations of science and technology: the role of metaphors in the press and the popular scientific magazines. *Public Understanding of Science* 13, 347–62.

Sherry-Brennan, F., Devine-Wright, H., & Devine-Wright, P. (2010). Public understanding of hydrogen energy: a theoretical approach. *Energy Policy* 38(10), 5311–5319.

Tindale, R. S., & Kameda, T. (2000). 'Social Sharedness' as a unifying theme for information processing in groups. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 3, 123–140. doi:10.1177/1368430200003002002

Wagner, W. (1998). Social representations and beyond: brute facts, symbolic coping and domesticated worlds. *Culture and Psychology* 4(3), 297–329. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1354067X9800400302>

Zehr, S. C. (2000). Public representations of scientific uncertainty about global climate change. *Public Understanding of Science* 9(2), 85–103. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1088/0963-6625/9/2/301>