



# The fundamental needs underlying social representations

Eric Bonetto\*, Grégory Lo Monaco

Aix-Marseille Université, LPS EA 849, 13621, Aix en Provence, France



## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Affiliative need  
Epistemic need  
Human motives  
Social representations

## ABSTRACT

Some theories dealing with the social construction of reality refer to epistemic and affiliative needs. These latter are considered as two fundamental human motives underlying such construction processes. The Social Representations Theory refers instead to more specific functions. Yet, the literature provides numerous evidences of the fulfillment of these two core needs by social representations. The present contribution exposes some of these evidences in order to show the anchoring of the Social Representations Theory in epistemic and affiliative human needs. This broader perspective provides stronger foundations to this theory and a clearer view of this one. Implications for the evolutionary perspective of SRs and on the epistemological plan are also discussed. Moreover it encourages to take a closer look at the relationships with other theories assuming these same foundations, and militates for the construction of bridges with them on theoretical and methodological plans.

## 1. Introduction

An important amount of theoretical and empirical studies emphasizes the social foundations of cognitions, beliefs and representations (see Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009; Levine, Resnick, & Higgins, 1993), whether these ones refer to objective, scientific, or lay knowledges (e.g., Kruglanski, Dechesne, Orehek, & Pierro, 2009). This is the case in the field of social psychology (e.g., Asch, 1952; Bar-Tal, 2000, 1990; Festinger, 1950; Heider, 1958; Higgins & Pittman, 2008; Higgins, 1992; Hogg, 2001; Levine, Resnick, & Higgins, 1993; Lewin, 1947; Lyons & Kashima, 2003; Mead, 1934; Merton & Kitt, 1950; Moscovici, 2008; Newcomb, 1959; Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994; Postmes, Haslam, & Swaab, 2005; Resnick, Levine, & Teasley, 1991; Schachter, 1959; Sherif, 1935, 1936; Tindale & Kameda, 2000; Tindale, Meisenhelder, Dykema-Engblade, & Hogg, 2001; Turner & Oakes, 1997), but also in other fields such as developmental (Meltzoff & Decety, 2003) and evolutionary psychology (Caporael, 2007; De Waal, 2008), sociology (Thompson & Fine, 1999), psycholinguistics (Pickering & Garrod, 2004), neurosciences (Gallese, Keysers, & Rizzolatti, 2004), biology (Dunbar & Shultz, 2007) or philosophy (Thagard, 1997).

Some of these theories emphasize the fundamental human needs or motives underlying such knowledge formations (e.g., Echterhoff et al., 2009; Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2007; Kruglanski et al., 2009), especially by emphasizing two motives that featured prominently in the literature on social motivation and on shared reality (see Hardin & Higgins, 1996): epistemic and affiliative needs (Echterhoff et al., 2009).

It is not the case for the Social Representations Theory (SRT; Moscovici, 2008; see also Lo Monaco, Delouvé, & Rateau, 2016; Sammut, Andreouli, Gaskell, & Valsiner, 2015). Indeed, in the framework of this theory, this question is mainly tackled in terms of more specific functions (e.g., Moscovici, 1988), without any reference to broader general human needs.

Based on the evidences provided by the literature, especially about the functions of SRs, the present contribution aims to show that the SRT is fundamentally rooted in these two core needs that are epistemic and affiliative needs. These stronger foundations could be considered as a sizeable enrichment for the SRT. Moreover, as we will see, this new perspective could allow a better understanding of SRs in an evolutionary perspective (Schaller & Latané, 1996). In addition, the present contribution is able to revive and enrich the old epistemological debate between SRs and social cognition. Finally, it presents some implications of this broader perspective, certainly for the SRT itself, but also for its positioning among the other theories related to the social base of knowledge. Especially, this leads to encourage fruitful bridging works at both theoretical and methodological levels.

## 2. The fundamental needs underlying social representations

### 2.1. The social representations theory

Social representations (SRs) can be defined as structured systems of ideas, opinions, attitudes, knowledge, beliefs shared by a social group about a social object (Moscovici, 2008; Rateau, Moliner, Guimelli, &

\* Corresponding author. Aix Marseille Univ, LPS, 29 Av. Robert Schuman, 13621, Aix-en-Provence, France.  
E-mail address: [eric.bonetto@univ-amu.fr](mailto:eric.bonetto@univ-amu.fr) (E. Bonetto).

Abric, 2011, p. 478; see also; Keczer, File, Orosz, & Zimbardo, 2016). SRs constitute “what people think of knowing and are persuaded to know about objects, about situations, about given groups” (Abric, 1996, p. 11; see; Bonetto, Girandola, & Lo Monaco, 2018). This theory focuses on lay thinking (e.g., Ernst-Vintila, Delouvé, & Roland-Lévy, 2011). Especially, it focuses on the construction of a common view of a social object – a SR – through interpersonal interactions between the members of a specific social group (Moscovici, 1988, see Breakwell, 1993; Brunel et al., 2017; Moloney & Walker, 2002; Wagner, 1995, 1998). Thus, using various methods (see Lo Monaco, Piermattéo, Rateau, & Tavani, 2016), studies convoke various social objects, such as studying (Moliner, 1995; Zouhri & Rateau, 2015), blood donation (Moloney, Hayman, Gamble, Smith, & Hall, 2017), environmental issues (Piermattéo, Lo Monaco, & Girandola, 2016; Souchet & Girandola, 2013), or social groups (e.g., Piermattéo, Lo Monaco, Moreau, & Girandola, 2014). Moreover, some of these studies even investigate interconnections between SRs and sociocognitive processes (e.g., Bonetto et al., 2018; Lo Monaco, Girandola, & Guimelli, 2016; Piermattéo et al., 2016; Souchet & Girandola, 2013).

However, the literature does not explicitly address the question of the rooting of this theory in core human needs. Numerous such needs have been proposed in the framework of the theories dealing with the social construction of beliefs (e.g., Crocker, 2007; Fiske, 2007; Higgins & Pittman, 2008). Two of them, corresponding to two fundamental adaptive requirements of human survival, are often highlighted: The epistemic and affiliative (i.e., affiliative) needs (see Echterhoff et al., 2009).

## 2.2. Social representations fulfill epistemic needs

On the one hand, epistemic needs refer to the effort after meaning (e.g., Bartlett, 1932; Silver & Wortman, 1980), that is the need to achieve a (perceived) reliable understanding of the environment (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Kopietz, Hellmann, Higgins, & Echterhoff, 2010). The epistemic motives, through the attribution of meaning to objects in the social environment, allow to deal with the environment by perceiving this one as stable, predictable or controllable (see Echterhoff et al., 2009; Festinger, 1954; Jost et al., 2007; Mead, 1934; Turner, 1991), and thus to avoid uncertainty (Hogg, 2007; Kruglanski, 2004), even though this meaning would not correspond to an objective reality (Brickman, 1978; Echterhoff et al., 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2009; see Roets & Van Hiel, 2011).

Yet, SRs have a meaning-making function (Moscovici, 1988; see also; Jost & Ignatow, 2001; Rateau et al., 2011), a SR providing the individual a vision of the represented social object within his social group. Moreover, the construction of the representation of an object belonging to the social environment allows to enhance the control over this one and a reduction of uncertainty about it (see Sammut et al., 2015; Wagner, Kronberger, & Seifert, 2002). One can also refer to objectification and anchoring processes (Moscovici, 2008). Indeed, objectifying implies to simplify the reality in order to control it. Otherwise, anchoring new information in a previous frame of thinking consists in familiarizing the novelty and reducing its strangeness. Consequently, broadening the “functions” perspective so far adopted by the SRT, SRs allow individuals to fulfill their epistemic needs.

## 2.3. Social representations fulfill affiliative needs

On the other hand, affiliative needs lead individuals to affiliate to others, to affiliate to some groups (e.g., Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Levine & Kerr, 2007). Indeed, the literature about group processes shows that agreement or consensual positions are motivated both by epistemic (e.g., Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Hogg, 2007; Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006; Sherif, 1935) and affiliative (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Levine & Kerr, 2007) motives. Groups are “meaning providers” for their members (Festinger,

Schachter, & Back, 1950, see also; Dugas & Kruglanski, 2018; Kruglanski et al., 2006), and individuals prefer to satisfy their epistemic needs with the members of their own group (e.g., Festinger, 1950; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). In turn, the sharing of common views is considered as a crucial component of groupness (see Bar-Tal, 2000, 1990; Kruglanski et al., 2009), and allow to fulfill needs for affiliation (Asch, 1952; Sherif, 1936).

Yet, SRs serve an identity function (e.g., Andersén, 2010; Breakwell, 1993; Hewstone, Jaspars, & Laljee, 1982; Mugny & Carugati, 1985). Indeed, if this function is not limited to that (see Hewstone et al., 1982; Liu & Hilton, 2005), it is stressed that the common vision of the object of representation would allow identification to the group (Moliner, 1993; Rateau et al., 2011; Zouhri & Rateau, 2015). According to Moscovici (1976, p. 44), a SR reflects an “image reservoir” from which people draw to construct their social identities. SRs are thus fully involved in the creation and regulation of a group's social identity (Duveen, 1993). Broadening this “functions” perspective, SRs satisfy affiliative needs. Moreover, a theoretical point can allow to gain a finer-grained vision of affiliative needs in the framework of the SRT. Indeed, Moliner (1993) defines two kinds of group-object relationships – or configurations – and proposed two corresponding identity stakes. In the structural configuration, the existence of the group sharing the representation is closely related to the object of representation. This object can even be the reason for the existence of the group, such as studying for undergraduate students (e.g., Moliner, 1995). In this case, we observe “identity stakes”: the definition of the identity of the group is rooted in the sharing of the SR of the object at the heart of the group. In the second configuration, the situational one, a pre-existing group is confronted with an object in the social environment without this object being linked to the very existence of the group. It is the case, for example, of waste sorting in a population of undergraduate students (Piermattéo et al., 2016). In this configuration, rather, we observe “cohesion stakes”: The sharing of the representation of the object allows the cohesion of the group members by the way a common view of the object.

## 3. Conclusion

SRs, just like several other theories dealing with the social construction of reality, fulfill epistemic and affiliative needs. Indeed, groups provide to their members a meaning to be given to specific and important objects, and SRs are such meaning structures (e.g., Moscovici, 1988; Rateau et al., 2011). In turn, the affiliation to the group involves the sharing of common views about specific objects, and SRs are such “in-group reference points” (e.g., Zouhri & Rateau, 2015, p. 670; see also; Moliner, 1993; Rateau et al., 2011). These two core needs are thus inter-related.

This broader perspective, which was not explicitly stated in the literature so far, can offer a clearer view on the roots of SRs in terms of broad human needs. Moreover, it provides stronger foundations to the SRT, allowing to move from the performance of specific functions to the fulfillment of general human needs.

This new perspective could also enrich the evolutionary perspective applied to SRs (Schaller & Latané, 1996). From such a perspective, SRs can be considered as species. Just as physiological characteristics of biological species manifest themselves in specific individual organisms, the beliefs characteristic of a specific SR manifest themselves in the minds of individuals belonging to the same group. Yet, this perspective implies that the emergence and dynamics of SRs may follow processes very much closed to the ones at work in the natural selection. Yet, to integrate such an evolutionary perspective, it can be argued that the SRT needs to move from a “specific functions perspective” in order to embrace a broader conception in terms of more indispensable human needs. Indeed, such essential needs seem to better fit this evolutionary perspective. Consequently, and in agreement with the conception of Schaller and Latané (1996), we can hypothesize that a transformation

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6810971>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6810971>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)