Social representations in the 21st century

Aliona Melentieva

Aliona Melentieva - university lecturer, MA in social Psychology, PhD student, Department of Psychology, Free International University of Moldova, Chisinau, Republic of Moldova

ABSTRACT

**Beginning with 21st century the concept of "social representation" entered into the world of social researches strengthening its positions in time. Social representations can bring to light a plenitude of data related to different social phenomena and aspects of a certain group in a given context. It involves the individual and the group (no matter its dimension) at the same time, showing their direct interconnection that sometimes has very deep roots. Due to its dynamic character, social representations allow scholars to carry out cross-sectional studies as well as longitudinal studies.
The concept of social representation has a historical background of one hundred years (more or less) characterized by different stages: appearance, stagnation, intensive development. Nowadays the given concept is in the stage of refining when quantity passes into quality.**

KEYWORDS:
theory of social representations, triangulation, qualitative analysis, quantitative and qualitative methods.

At present, the theory of social representations covers a very large area in the field of social sciences having a peculiar and steady place within. Starting with a vague and incomplete definition, now it has many branches, methodology of researching, and a series of definitions that characterize many peculiarities and hidden aspects of the concept of social representation. We can find a plenty of materials specialized in the given domain – books, journals, chapters, PhD theses, articles, results of empirical studies, reflections. In some institutions, social representations are studied separately, mainly at master or doctoral cycles. Social representations can bring information about

every social reality and elucidate many social phenomena revealing many features of a certain social group. Due to this fact, the theory of social representations expanded so successfully worldwide.

Generally speaking, the theory of social representations is preoccupied with the research and analysis of the ways of perceiving the surrounding world by the individual, within different social groups, and how these "comprehensions" of the individual are changing, developing and interacting etc. Thus, in last decades of the last century the researches in the field of social representations were focused on discovering and developing new methods and technics of investigation of the given notion. These studies were centered mainly on defining the concept of social representation in order to reveal and design its internal structure, to determine the elements of representation, to assess its dynamics depending on its subject and object, the context within which it is occurring, the channels of its spreading, the established and variable circumstances etc. We consider important to mention the researchers that brought a substantial contribution in creating a variety of methods and technics of researching the phenomenon under discussion: Jean Claude Abric (structural approach of the social representations, functioning of the central core by activating the constitutive elements, "mute zones"), Pascal Moliner (dynamics of social representations, social representations and socio-cognitive processes, checking the centrality of social representation, technic of "inducing by the ambiguous scenario", "technic of discussing the elements of central core"), Willem Doise, Fabio Lorenzi Cioldi, Alain Clé-

mence (organizing principles that generate positioning (individual/social), social meta-systems and stages of analyses), Paul Vergès (prototypical-categorical technic, free evocation), Christian Guimelli, Michel-Louis Roquette (model of basic cognitive schemes), Claude Flament (analysis of similarities Q-sort), Annamaria Silvana de Rosa (network of associations) Denise Jodelet etc. (Melentieva, 2016).

Nowadays, many researchers state that social representations develop and circulate at different levels – Duveen and Lloyd argue that the representations should be studied in three interdependent levels: *ontogenesis* (process of activating the social representation of the individual while he/she "grows up" within the existent social representation, as for instance the social representation of gender which could be researched by longitudinal studies), *socio-genesis* (how social representation circulate and are active at a larger level of the society; how they develop, modify and interact between them; as example could serve the research of social representation of media and political documents), and *micro-genesis* (how social representation is evoked and discussed at the interactional level between individuals within a social group; the representations at this level are usually studied by applying the interview and its different forms – individual, narrative, episodic, of group, focus-group) (Flick et al., 2015).

In the 21st century, all contributions brought by scholars from the area of social representations were developed, perfected, validated, combined – enriching the variety of methodologies of studying the phenomenon of representations and outlining new tendencies

and concerns. We can affirm that nowadays there are many qualitative and quantitative methods to study and analyze the social phenomena through the theory of social representation that is why the discussions of researchers from this sphere are focused on the problematic of choosing and combining these methods. The qualitative analysis of social representations is determined by the following methods: individual interview, narrative interview (excluding "why?" questions), episodic interview, group interview, strategy of "devil's advocate", documentary analysis, focus-group (approach of the conversation analysis) (Flick et al., 2015). Nowadays, quantitative methods of researching social representation used by scholars are the following: statistical analysis, factorial analysis (analysis of the main components (Likert Scale), multiple factorial analyses), hierarchic evocations (2003, J.-C. Abric), crossed validations of the technics "checking the centrality" (Attribute Challenge Technique), crossed validation of the "basic cognitive schemes" and "checking centrality" by Moliner (2003, Ch. Guimelli, P. Rateau), test of the context independence (2008, G. Lo Monaco), analysis of the corresponding factor applied to the characterization questionnaire (2012, G. Lo Monaco, J.-C. Abric, A. Piarmattéo, Ch. Guimelli), technic of organizing principles of individual differences presented by the bipolar questionnaire and factorial analysis (Doise W. et alt), organizing principles of the contextual positions: hierarchic analysis, *Alceste* method (statistic lexical analysis) etc. (Lo Monaco, 2014; Flick et al., 2015).

A new tendency in studying social representations is *triangulation* which represents the combination of some ways of investigating the phenomenon, thus outlining many aspects of the researched subject (researching social representation of different social groups – "comparative" studies). Triangulation could be methodological, theoretical and combined (Flick et al., 2015).

Sammut G. and the collaborators mention that despite of the fact that in last years the theory of social representations contributed very much to the comprehension of a myriad of socio-psychological phenomena, it was criticized because of some sensitive features (which are still under analysis), as the role of cognition, the ambiguity of concepts and terms, the meaning of the term "social" etc. But, this fact contributed to the development and not to the failure of the theory of social representations, encouraging the researchers from the given domain to polish the definitions, solve incoherencies, harmonize some trends with other researching psycho-social and sociological current trends. Today, there are some early problems in debating process from the social representation field, as following: difference between social representations and attitudes, difference between individual representations and social representations, impact of the diversity in modern public spheres, way of defining the groups and communities.

Nevertheless, the concept of Serge Moscovici "social representation" of the psychoanalysis in France (1961-1976) was developed, explored and extended very much. In this context Sammut and his team of collaborators, conclude that: "... theory of social representations has developed within a coherent framework of the evolution, structure and functions of the common sense in its variability, namely in sociocultural and sociopolitical context.

The concept of social representations has accomplished (and are accomplishing) the mission of questioning the mentalities and corollary problems that intervene from the diversity of the human conduct in a series of contexts. Recently, the concept of social representation was searching to understand how this diversity is reconciled in social relationships. Meanwhile, the theory of social representations represents a pillar in social sciences in comparison with other theories and approaches, overtaking the simplistic reductionism and behaviorism. Moreover, it pays much attention to the informational and nomological approaches of the psychology. The assessment of Robert Farr of the theory of social representations consists in the fact that the given theory provides a conceptualization of the human actions, which are dependent on context and culture, providing evidence of the behavior that manifests *in situ.* This paradigm is recognized by many scientific communities as a rival one in the social psychology" (Sammut, 2015).

As we can notice, the theory of social representations is one of the main preoccupations in today's psycho-sociology. This fact is confirmed by the activity of scholars, researchers and experts related to the given domain from the entire world, but mainly from the Western Europe. Taking into consideration that the founder of the theory of social representation had activated in France, the most influent school in the field is the French one, represented by the University Paul Valery - Montepelier III and University Aix-Marseille where there are many known researchers as Rouquette Michel-Louis, Rateau Patrick, Maria Gutermann, Christian Guimelli, Jean-Claude Abric, Pascal Moliner, Grégory Lo Monaco,

Eric Tafani, Claude Flament etc. The French school is followed by the Swiss one from the University of Geneva represented by the scholars Willem Doise, Fabio Lorenzi-Cioldi (group of researching the inter-group relations and social representations), Gabriel Mugny (Laboratory of researching the social influence). In last decades, the English school made some serious contributions to the field of social representation, namely the London School of Economics and Political Sciences (LSE), Cambridge University, The University of Stirling, Sainsbury Center of Metal Health. Within these institutions, the following researchers preoccupied with the issue of social representations activate: Uwe Flick, Robert Farr, Sandra Jovchelovitch, George Gaskell, Martin W. Bauer, Diana Rose, Danielle Efraim, Nicola Morant, Helene Joffe, Marie-Claude Gervais, Gerard Duveen, Ivana Markova (*London School of Economics*). It is worthy to mention the Italian School, which also manifested itself in the last years, being presented by the University Sapienza of Roma (Annamaria Silvana de Rosa) and University of Bologna (Felice Carugati). Since the beginning of the '90s of the last century (until the present), a great contribution was brought by the Austrian school represented by the University of Linz, headed by the researchers Wolfgang Wagner and Johannes Kepler. University of Coimbra from Portugal also is involved in the process of researching the social representations, led by Isabel Miguel and Joaquim Pires Valentim (Carugati, 2010).

A particular contribution is brought by the Latin America which is represented by the Brazilian researcher Celso Pereira de Sá from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (he founded the journal of Psychology and social

cognition, *Psicologia e Saber Social*-2012) (*Sociedade Brasileira de Psicologia*, 2016).

In comparison with Western Europe which came with new concepts and approaches developing the theory of social representation, Eastern Europe borrowed the studies from colleagues and applied them on a large scale in the practice of investigating the psycho-social phenomena of interest. In Russia the researchers that deal with the theoretical studies (reflections, analysis, translations, synthesis) of social representations are: Bovina I. B. (Theory of social representations: historical background and development, 2010, Strategies of research of social representations), Emilianova T. P. (monograph – Social representations. Historical background, theory and empirical research, 2010), Cernov A. Iu. (Psychological research of the structure of social representations, 2004), Andreeva G. M. (Psychology of social knowledge, 2005, Social psychology in the contemporary world, 2002). Experimental studies (applying the methodology proposed by the researchers of Western Europe): Babeikova G. P. (actual social representations of the students from universities, Astrakhan, 2011), Pattison A. S. (peculiarities of social representations about Russians in Czechs and Americans, 2011, Moscow), Larina T. I., Il'ina A. A. (reconstruction of social representation about city using the method „Go along", Moscow, 2016), Gurova O. S., Savcenco E.D. (social representations of the teachers about the subjects of the educational process, Altai, 2013), Vasilieva O. S., Filatov F.R. (social representations of health, Moscow, 2001), Grebennikova O. V. (Peculiarities of social representations of adolescents, Moscow, 2010).

Ukraine also presents interest for the theory of social representations as mentions Zaharov C. V. in its article "Methods of researching social representations in Ukraine: generalities and perspectives" (2013). He presents a series of authors interested in the given topic with applicative fields of social psychology. *Ethnic Psychology:* Vaculenco A. L., Vasilicenco O. N., Scnar O. N., Ziatdinova E. B.; *Forensic Psychology:* Diduc I. A., Ovdienco L. N., Pancenco T. S., Svejentseva; *Pedagogical Psychology:* Rudenoc A. I., Schibina A. V.; *Organizational Psychology:* Baletskaia L. M., Ohremenco A. R., Sila T. I.; *Political Psychology:* Volifovskaia T. A., Dembitskaia N. M., Drozdov A. Iu., Zaharor C. V. According to the author, the majority of studies are focused on the investigation of social representation that has as object social groups or concrete public processes. The interest of the Ukrainian scholars began in 2000 with theoretical studies, and from 2003 – empirical studies came into stage (Zakharov, 2013).

In Romania, there are many authors that borrowed the methodology of the western colleagues and as well made their own contribution into the given field. The most representative researchers are: Adrian Neculau (1938-2012), Mihai Curelaru, Luminiţa Mihaela Iacob, Andreea Vintilă, Viorel Robu, Narcisa Caranfil, Anişoara Sandovici, Radu L., Vlăduţ M., Cochinescu L., Cristea D., Gavreliuc A. etc., who contributed with projects, monographs, chapters, communications, articles, empirical studies related to the field of social representations. A particular contribution represents the translation of the French, English, German materials referred to actual researches of social representation into Romanian language.

In the Republic of Moldova the researchers

only recently manifested the interest for the social representations area. The scholars that contributed and continue to contribute to the initiation of studying the theory of social representations are the collaborators of Free International University of Moldova, State Pedagogical University „I. Creanga", State University of Balti: Mihai Şleahtiţchi, Svetlana Rusnac, Diana Cazacu, Maria Popescu, Şişianu A., Potâng A. etc. (Şleahtiţchi, 2016).

The affirmation and consolidation of the theory of social representations were realized by different ways. *The Doctoral European School in Social Representation and Communications* (founded in 1993 by Anamaria Silvano de Rosa) plays an important role in developing and expanding the area of social representations, having the headquarter in Italy – University Sapienza of Roma, and branch offices in Czech Republic – University Masaryk of Brno, France – Universities Aix-Marseille and Montpellier III, Romania – University „Al. I. Cuza" of Iasi, Spain – University of Basque country and Valencia. Besides the head offices, the school cooperates with the institutions of higher education as University of Linz (Austria), the School of Higher Education and Social Sciences and Paris V – Descartes (France), Cambridge University and the London School of Economics and Political Science (Great Britain), Lusophony University (Portugal), University of Geneva and Lausanne (Switzerland), University Matej Bel (Slovakia). The School has also non-European partners: University of Buenos Aires (Argentina), Federal University of Santa Catarina (Brazil), University of Ottawa (Canada), Pedagogical University of Beijing, University of Nankai (China), Autonomous Metropolitan University of Mexico (Mexica), State University of

New York (USA). It prepares specialists and experts in the given field, organizes international professional summer schools, integrates a database of scientific articles and chapters on the issue of social representations on the school website. Besides, the school organizes scientific sessions called international practical "reunions" (2/3 per year from 2005) which, every time, approach a peculiar aspect of social representations (*European/International joint Ph.D in SR and Communication*).

Another way is spreading the knowledge and new realizations of the domain by press. Thus, the most influent journal preoccupied namely by the field of social representation is the scientific review ***Papers on Social Representations***, founded in 1992 by Johannes Kepler from the University of Linz, Austria. Since 2009 and until now the journal is issued under the London School of Economics and Political Science, integrating the last tendencies in the theoretical-empirical researches of the field of social representations. This journal includes articles published by authors from the entire world – France, Great Britain, Italia, Belgium, Argentinian Republic, Mexica, Israel, Greece, Russia, Australia, Columbia, Czech Republic, Romania, Brazil, USA, Portugal etc. The publications also include materials of the conferences dedicated to social representations organized every two years since 1992 worldwide (Montreal, Canada – 2000, Stirling, Great Britain – 2002, Guadalajara, Mexica – 2004, Roma, Italy – 2006, Bali, Indonesia – 2008, Tunis, Tunisia – 2010, Evora, Portugal – 2012, Sao Paulo, Brazil – 2014, Marseille, France – 2016) (*Papers on Social Representations*, 2016).

Sammut George, Andreouli Eleni, Gaskell

George, Valsiner Jaan (eds.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Representations*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, 480 pag., presents an overview on the main aspects of the theory of social representations which for a long time were discussed and misunderstood, gathering all theoretical perspectives of the theory development, some of which becoming pillars in the social psychology (Sammut, 2015).

The director of the Laboratory of social psychology (founded by Serge Moscovici in 1965) of the School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences, Denise Jodelet, has published recently the monograph *Representations sociales et monde de vie* (*Social representations and world of life*)*,* Paris: Editions des archives contemporaines, 2015. The work explores in a unique way the dynamics of social thinking, reveals the original contribution on the examined representational phenomenon from many points of view – epistemological, of social character, of social pertinence, of applicability, including proposals for further studies and having a resonance at the international level, mainly in Europe and Latin America (Kalampalikis, 2015).

Serge Moscovici, *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology,* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, 240 p., edited by Gerard Duveen, involves a vast area of researches, analysis and synthesis of the phenomenon of social representation, explains in detail the ontogenesis of the concept of social representation, completing it with reflections and correlations related to society and theory, concept of *themata,* social consciousness and development of ideas (Moscovici, 2000).

Social Psychology (*Psihologia socială),*the journal of the Laboratory "The Psychology of Social Field" of the University „Al. I. Cuza", Iasi, Romania, founded by Adrian Neculau are open for all researchers from the domain, as well as for those from the neighboring domains. It appeals not only to scientific community of social psychology but also to literate public. Topics of working of the journal are the following: institutional analysis, social anthropology, social cognition, social communication, mass psychology, environment psychology, organizational psychology, applied social psychology, inter-group relations, change of attitudes, technics of research, etc. (*Revista de psihologie sociala,* 2018).

Concluding we can say that behind the theory of social representation there are an army of international and national researchers that helped to its development and expansion. The high interest of scholars in the given domain is determined by the specific and various characters of social representations – they circulate, they change, they deepen in roots, they develop, they disappear, they influence within society/ies etc. Social representations can show the links between people and researched object, they can show the "unity" of the group of people regarding a certain object or social phenomena. At present, the results/products mentioned above of the theory of social representations development facilitate very much the process of researching certain social representation. The plenty of technics allow to make the suitable choice of researching direction and to get the necessary data/results.

As a closing remark, we would like to insist that the concept of social representation is unique and very helpful in social researches. Taking into account that the social perspec-

tive of the representations under discussion we would like to emphasize the fact that our society is our context and condition of living, we cannot stay aside – we are united by a common sense of perceiving our social, cultural, political, economic realities at the same time leaving the individual print on this "collective spirit".

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Correspondence:

Aliona Melentieva,
MA in social Psychology, PhD student, Department of Psychology, Free International University of Moldova, 52 Vlaicu Parcalab str., Chisinau-2012, Republic of Moldova
E-mail: alionamelentieva@gmail.com