In What Sense Is Representation Social?

An Examination of Moscovici's Representation Theory

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This paper clarifies the concept of "social representation" in Moscovici's social representation theory (SRT). SRT focuses on the construction of shared meaningful experiences through the recovery of the Durkheimian concept of "*représentations sociales*." However, many researchers have differently employed the term social representation. Therefore, little consensus exists on the essential meaning of this concept. Above all, it is crucial to determine in what sense a representation is social in order to distinguish between SRT and other social representation approaches. However, little attention has been paid to this issue. I compare Moscovici's approach with other post-Durkheimian ways of thinking about social representation, as classified by R. Harré. Harré's classification allows us to highlight the distinction between an individual's inner and private cognitive phenomena and the public practices of a community. With this classification, Harré evaluated Moscovici's approach as a cognitive reductionism and proceeded to justify cultural and normative approaches to social representation based on his Wittgensteinian perspective. However, I argue that Moscovici's theory of representation concentrates on neither the individual's cognitive phenomena nor the public practices of a community. In so doing, I present the strengths of Moscovici's research on social representation.

For Moscovici, the idea of social representation sheds light on the articulations of people and their worlds through communication. In this idea, the contention that "the representation is social" indicates that representation shapes collective actions, each with their own structure and orientation, through the construction of normative or cultural contexts and the organization the subjective commitment of members. I argue that this idea leads to a revaluation of the roles played by *psychological* and *subjective* factors in the explanations of group phenomena, while not falling into cognitive reductionism. I subsequently show that Moscovici's research enriches earlier studies of social representations.