Queries about Social Representation and Construction

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Running Head: Social Representation and Construction

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Abstract:

Departing from the stated intent of the social representation approach to give a social constructionist account of social processes, this paper presents a critical analysis of language use within the realm of social representations research. Three questions are posed: (a) Does a social representation represent an object? (b) Can social representations be true or false? and (c) Is social construction action? All three are answered negatively. It is shown that object-talk is inherent to social cognition and to the common-sensical view of social actors, but incompatible with a constructionist position; that truth-talk is part of collective discourse in the socio-genesis of representations, but senseless when talking about a representation; that a social representation is not a representation of an object, but ontologically identical with it; and that social construction happens rather than being intended by social actors. Consequently, social representations are interpreted as the significant meaning of constructive events and neither as entities in the minds of people nor floating above a collectivity. Their relationship with discourse analysis is discussed.
Queries about Social Representation and Construction

In 1987 Rob Farr introduced a special issue on social representations in this journal by his paper on A French tradition of research. Now, nearly ten years later, this French tradition has gained still wider acceptance in the non-French speaking world. This would not have happened if the approach did not have anything to contribute to our social psychological understanding of social life through enriching "psychology by enlarging its scope" (Farr, 1993a, p. 137) and by opening up new fields of application. Nowadays there is no need to introduce the very basic notions of the approach. They are well known and applied in a wide variety of empirical research.¹

The social representation² approach³ is a paradigmatic way (Moscovici, 1995b) of making scientific sense of an array of social phenomena ranging from the role popularised science plays in modern societies, to social and cultural processes and to common-sense in general. In its conception it claims to entail a constructionist⁴ view of social life. Moscovici and his collaborators stress this point in all their basic theoretical writings. However, it seems that the social constructionist side of social representation does not always gain the degree of explicit acknowledgement it actually deserves. There appears to be a lack of concern for the role discourse, practice, and objectification play in the making of a socially represented world contrasted by a strong concern for their role in the making of a representation.⁵

Thinking about how social representation relates to the local world of a group sets this approach sharply apart from social cognition and connects it closely to current strands of theorising in social constructionism (e.g. Gergen, 1985a, 1985b), positioning theory (e.g. Davies & Harré, 1990) and discourse analysis (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992). There has been a long and hefty series of discussions between proponents of these approaches and researchers in the field of social representation, most of which was stimulating by pointing out possible problems within and differences between the apparently discrepant approaches (e.g. Banchs, 1994; Ibáñez, 1994; Jovchelovitch, 1994; Parker, 1994; Potter & Billig, 1992). The discussions, however, also revealed convergent topics of theorising and aims of research. Hence, although often viewed as competing theories of social thinking and acting, these approaches, rather than being
incompatible, complement each other in important and fundamental aspects. These discussions also highlighted certain ontological and epistemological presuppositions in the contemporary social representation approach which can be interpreted as an unwelcome inheritance from the traditional social cognition paradigm which so powerfully dominated, and still dominates, the last 40 years of theorising within social psychology.

The present paper points out what consequences certain ways of talking and writing about social representations, rather unwittingly, may have for an understanding of representation as social construction. These consequences, in my opinion, are not warranted at all if the social representation approach is thought as an alternative to an individualistic understanding in social psychology. It will be argued, for example, that talking about "a social representation of something", i.e. of an object be it material or imaginary, darkens more than it elucidates the concept of social representation. In the course of the analysis I intend to show that contradictions can arise in theoretical accounts, if one insists in talking about objects of social representations instead of "dissolving" the object in a wider understanding of representation. Such in part contradictory language may have sparked some of the critique waged against the social representation approach by social constructionists and discourse analysts. As a consequence, the role of action and discourse, both within representation and construction is discussed with respect to an ontology of representations. Furthermore, this text develops further the idea of the identity of representation with talk and action (Wagner, 1994a; 1994b; 1995a).

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION IN THEORETICAL ACCOUNTS OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATION

From its inception theoretical accounts of the social representation approach have included strong statements about its social constructionist character. In the following I present some key quotations which reflect the concern for a constructionist approach (emphases by W. W. if not otherwise stated).6

"Social representation is defined as the elaborating of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating." (Moscovici, 1963, p. 251)

With reference to popularised scientific theory, a
"social representation is not fundamentally an impoverishing, but a transforming, of scientific theory; and its logic is not a make-shift, but a fulfilling of the requirements of the elaboration of social reality." (p. 252)

With reference to the relation between the inside and outside world of individuals and groups,

"subject and object are not regarded as functionally separate. An object is located in a context of activity since it is what it is because it is in part regarded by the person or the group as an extension of their behaviour … Not to recognize the power of our capacity for representation to create objects and events is like believing that there is no connection between our 'reservoir' of images and our capacity for imagination." (Moscovici, 1973, p. xi)

Or

"by setting a conventional sign on reality on the one hand, and, on the other, by prescribing, through tradition and age-old structures, what we perceive and imagine, these creatures of thought, which are representations, end up by constituting an actual environment." (Moscovici, 1984, p. 12)

And

"… a representation is constructive to the extent that it selects and relates persons, objects in such a way as to meet the stipulation of the group, …" (Moscovici, 1988, p. 230).

In criticising the conception of information processing, the author indulges in a lucid elaboration of what he conceives as construction. This is

"that 'creating' a reality means that we generally experience and think in terms of 'potential' worlds which are set in 'real' worlds. What I mean is that our worlds, such as they are or such as we think they are, are partly constituted by recollections of what they used to be, mixed in with anticipations, calculations, and alternatives that bring us together and make us act. The greater the extent to which a representation of this world is shared with other people, the more this world which is of our making, 'in here', seems to be autonomous, existing in its own, 'out there'.

"In effect, social representations, to rephrase a common expression, are ways of world making. There is nothing arbitrary in this process, since the regularities of thought,
language and life in society all act together to delimit the possibilities. That is why the concept of construction, once it is trivialized, loses its exact emancipating character, if it is envisaged as a simple product of talking and of consensus among individuals. If anything goes, then the act of constructing is less a creative liberty of reality than an illusion about the conditions of this liberty" (Moscovici, 1988, p. 231)

Serge Moscovici's long-standing collaborator in the field of social representations, Denise Jodelet, makes a point to a slightly different effect. Moscovici himself refers more or less indiscriminately to the construction of the representation, as a symbolic system, and to the construction of objects, such that the former immediately implies the latter. In his writings he creates the impression that both these aspects are necessarily linked. In Jodelet's writings the distinction between constructing a representation as a symbolic system and the construction of the object by a representation, is much more emphasised. The two become explicitly separated in her theorising. This is brought to the point in characterising a representation as "pensée constituante et pensée constituée" (Jodelet, 1984, p. 26). In sum:

"En tant que pensée constituée les représentations ainsi élaborées se transforment en produits qui opèrent dans la vie sociale, sur le plan intellectuel et pratique, comme des réalités préformées, des cadres d'interprétation du réel, de repérage pour l'action, des systèmes d'accueil de réalités nouvelles." (Jodelet, 1984, p. 26)

Similarly, representations are "modalités de connaissance", "phénomènes sociaux sui generis" ayant une efficace propre"[emphasis in the original] (p. 25), and they function as

"systèmes d'interprétation des rapports des hommes entre eux et avec leur environnement, orientant et organisant les conduites et les communications sociales, intervenant dans le développement individuel et collectif, dans la définition de l'identité personnelle et sociale, l'expression des groupes, dans la diffusion des connaissances et dans les transformations sociales." (p. 18)

Later, social representation is defined as

"une forme de connaissance, socialement élaborée et partagée, ayant une visée pratique et concourant à la construction d'une réalité commune à une ensemble social." (Jodelet, 1989a, p. 36)
The theoretical accounts given by Jodelet and Moscovici express a clear commitment to a social constructionist thinking. Written many years after Moscovici's first expositions of his constructionist approach, Gergen's (1985b) four criteria of social constructionism still express a less comprehensive view:

1. "What we take to be experience of the world does not in itself dictate the terms by which the world is understood…” (p. 4)
2. "The terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people." (p. 5)
3. "The degree to which a given form of understanding prevails or is sustained across time is not directly dependent on the empirical validity of the perspective in question, but on the vicissitudes of social processes." (p. 6) and
4. "Forms of negotiated understanding are of critical significance in social life, as they are critically connected with many other activities in which people engage." (p. 7)

All four of Gergen's criteria cover the construction of the understanding of the world, that is in a wider sense the person, while omitting (except in point 4) the construction of the world itself by virtue of this understanding, which takes a prominent position in the social representation paradigm. Yet critiques have not ceased to charge the approach of an individualist, static and non-constructionist tendency (e.g. Ibáñez, 1994; Parker, 1989; Potter & Billig, 1992, to name but a few). I cannot hope to chronicle all of the possible reasons for their claim but one point certainly warrants consideration.

I suspect that current language use in accounts on social representation may have blurred its constructionist vector. As mentioned before, Jodelet's accounts of social representation and its constructive side have a somewhat different air than Moscovici's. She understands representations as systems of knowledge, symbols, etc., which are socially elaborated, which orient behaviour and intervene in the definition of individual and social identity and in the construction of objects. What is rarely referred to marginally in Moscovici's accounts becomes constitutive in Jodelet's writings. This is that the representation gets conceptually separated from the object which it represents—"Il n'ya pas de représentation sans objet" (Jodelet, 1989a, p. 37). Also the subject is yuxtaposed to the object—"La représentation sociale est toujours représentation de quelque chose (l'objet) et de quelqu'un (le sujet)." (p. 43), a formula which also
can be found in Moscovici (1984), but which is explicitly rejected in a later review (Moscovici, 1995a, p. 312f)—and the behaviour or practice, i.e. the subject's or group's interaction with the object, is seen as being oriented by the representation.

This conceptual decomposition of the term social representation in theoretical accounts is complemented by the terminology used in current research. The vast majority of research on social representations is titled—and the following is an arbitrary selection of topics without suggesting that their authors might be unaware of social construction—social representations of mental illness, of intelligence, of AIDS, of poverty, etc., indicating, first, a conceptual separation of the representation from its object, and, second, a prime concern for the symbolic, iconic and cognitive content constituting representations. The wording of these titles stands in stark contrast to the titles of the ground breaking works in the field: *La psychanalyse, son image et son public* (Moscovici, 1961/1976) and *Folies et représentations sociales* (Jodelet, 1989b) which clearly avoid the incriminated preposition <of>.

The question I wish to raise is, whether such a conceptual decomposition in the language used in the field of social representation is warranted within the framework of a constructionist approach, i.e. whether it does—implicitly—introduce a bias towards individualism and cognitivism, or not. To make a stronger case we should ask whether it makes sense to use concepts lent from cognitive social psychology—and, as I will show, from commonsense—within the realm of social representation. First, it is asked (a) whether a social representation ought to be depicted as a representation of an object; as a consequence to the first question, it is asked (b) whether social representations possess a truth value; and finally (c) whether the construction of the social world can be conceived as intentional action.

**DOES A SOCIAL REPRESENTATION REPRESENT AN OBJECT?**

**An ontological interlude on discourse and social cognition**

When the cognitive orientation took the place of behaviourist thinking in general and social psychology, this turn was greeted as the right step towards a more humane approach in modelling psychic processes. The rather mechanistic thinking in terms of stimuli and responses in behaviourism has never strongly appealed to a part of the psychologists, nor to the wider
public (cf. Farr, 1993b, p. 19). Thinking in cognitive terms, i.e. postulating states and instances in the human mind to explain overt and verbal behaviour of people, took over the psychological scene in a rush. One can only hypothesise about the reasons for the overwhelming success of the cognitive turn. However, one of the reasons might have been that thinking in cognitive terms in scientific psychology resembles more than behaviourist thinking the way common-sense depicts the working of the mind.

Discourse psychology has sharpened our awareness towards the fact that folk-psychological statements are to be taken seriously: i.e. as folk-psychology and as a rhetorical system of accounting and justifying action. This was, in a different way, anticipated by Smedslund (1978) and others in their critique of the everyday analytical structure of many mainstream social psychological theories. In this vein discourse psychology converges also with the critique cognitive science philosophers (Dennet, 1989; Churchland, 1991; Stitch, 1983) waged against a supposedly scientific psychology which is based on folk-concepts of the mind, even if the conclusions drawn by cognitive scientists and by discourse theorists are incompatible.

Some theorists point out that any psychological theory which depicts causal or correlational relationships between cognitions which can be substituted by common-sense assumptions or by rational propositions, are not amenable to experimental hypothesis testing. Smedslund (e.g. 1978) demonstrated how Bandura's Theory of Self-Efficacy (1977), among others, can be re-translated into a set of common-sense theorems. Holzkamp (1986) showed that theories of cognitive consistency, for example, hypothesise process relationships between cognitive entities which can also be "explained" by attributing the experimental subjects good reasons for their cognitive consistency conserving–behaviour. The experimental results can also be interpreted by reference to the subjects' rationality instead of invoking "causal" cognitive mechanisms.

Discourse theorists and social constructionists (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1993; Harré, 1990; Shotter, 1993) criticise the psycho-centric version of surrogationalism (Harris, 1981) inherent in cognitive psychology, i.e. the tendency to reify or "psychofy" the rhetorical figures used in everyday conversations. They question "some major assumptions and procedures through which particular kinds of underlying cognitions are traditionally defined." (Edwards & Potter,
This includes motives and desires (Harre, 1990, p. 116) and such words as remembering and forgetting, which became "psychofied" as memory, justification-explanation, which became attribution, thinking, which became information processing. A rhetorical figure such as "Sorry, I forgot your birthday" inserted into a conversation between friends, consequently becomes a matter of memory accuracy rather than a matter of mending an interpersonal problem by ritual excuse making. "Forgetting [and remembering] is not simply an issue of not remembering, … but is rather tied … to social conventions governing the 'operation of memory' in practical affairs." (Coulter, 1985, p. 133)

Successful (paper and pencil simulation) experiments in social cognition do not necessarily show the regularities of some mental instances or processes, but the regularities of peoples' talk when answering questions in specific (laboratory) situations which permit only a limited range of social interpretations. Because the relationships between so-called psychic phenomena are either evident by common-sense or reflecting rhetorical relationships in talk, experiments are often easily replicable under similar conditions and by using respondents pertaining to the same social group. That is why "experiments in cognitive social psychology are easy to run and their conclusions hard to disprove." (Markus & Zajonc, 1985, p. 139)

In this way Western common-sense informs a science of social psychology which, far from being universal, is only valid in Western culture (Wagner, 1995b, in press). From a social or cultural perspective it is less the supposed mental entity or process to which a folk-psychological concept refers which needs to be explained, but the use of those concepts which needs to be explained in terms of the social conditions evoking them (Foucault, 1974, p. 435ff).

A cognitive taste of social representations

It is my point that social cognition attains its particular appeal because it is modelled after common-sense's understanding of how the mind works. The same is true for our proto-philosophical idea of us, the person, confronting an object outside and different from ourselves (Fletcher, 1984, p. 204) and interacting with it by intention. The conceptual triad subject–object–interaction is also a formula central to common-sense and social cognition.
In Western common-sense thinking the object is either a thing or another person which is furnished with certain attributes. Interaction is either seeing an object, thinking or talking about it or acting towards it. If a person sees (or hears) an object, it is recognised and evaluated; if he or she thinks about an object, this object is present in one's mind, remembered or judged; a person acts toward an object because he or she wants so. By acting, the object is either materially transformed or affected in some other way. All this makes perfect sense as an inside view of everyday life and discursive practice. Object–talk and its relatives are a consequence of mistaking "features of discourse for features of the subject of discourse" (Goodman, 1972, p. 24; Shotter, 1993, p. 103f).

The ontological model of social cognition is identical to common-sense's proto-philosophy: "A representation is some event within the organism that stands for some object or event. The referent object or event can be external to the organism or internal [e.g. pain]" (Markus & Zajonc, 1985, p. 141f). The referent object is seen as possessing specific attributes independent of the activity of a subject and must be assessed by omitting "descriptions that involve perceiver interpretations …" (Ostrom, 1984, p. 9) and the representation or cognitive schema influences overt behaviour. The result is the well-known O–S–O–R (Organism, or representation,–Stimulus–Organism–Response) formula, i.e. the subject–object–interaction triad. This formula justifies to qualify cognitions as wrong, as being biased with regard to the object's description, and the ensuing behaviour as irrational (cf. Wetherick, 1995, for a similar point). This view has been strongly contested by social representation theorists (Moscovici, 1982, p. 127f).

Bearing this in mind, it comes as a surprise that we can find traces of this triad also in accounts of social representation; or, what comes to the same effect, that this triad is present in writing about social representations, even if it may not be thought to be constitutive for social representation. Moscovici (1984) for example, maintains that a representation is always a representation of something by some person or group. Jodelet (1989a, p. 35) speaks of "représentations … qui … donnent de l'objet qu'elles représentent une définition spécifique" or "[la représentation] est donc le représentant mental de l'objet qu'elle restitue symboliquement" (p. 37).
Hence, on the one hand accounts of social representation, though different in research interests, employ a similar *language* with respect to objects as social cognition. On the other hand, reference to the "constructive role of social representations that we share as active subjects and makers of our society" (Moscovici, 1988, p. 226) contradicts the common-sense ontology implied by the subject–object–interaction triad in two respects: (a) social construction–talk is not part of common-sense whereas object–talk is, and (b) object–talk raises the issue of truth qualifiers, whereas construction–talk does not.

Thinking everyday life in terms of social construction grossly contradicts our—at least Western—common-sense. Stating that representations are devices for constructing "une réalité commune à un ensemble social" (Jodelet, 1989a, p. 36) is a reflection *about* the working of common-sense, whereas "it is an inherent characteristic of common-sense thought precisely to … affirm that its tenets are immediate deliverances of experience, not deliberated reflections upon it." (Geertz, 1983, p. 75) Analysing common-sense in terms of social construction contradicts the spontaneous and unreflected character of how it is exercised; analysing it in terms of the subject–object–interaction triad means applying a model pertinent to it. It is rather difficult to think of a way of how to reconcile these two levels to go together in a theoretical account.

The latter issue (b) is dealt with in the next chapter.

**CAN SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS BE TRUE OR FALSE?**

**The truth of beliefs**

Distinguishing between representation and object is a strong ontological commitment. It puts representations and objects in different positions. While the representation pertains to the imaginary, symbolic realm *within* a generalised subject, the object remains *outside* as part of the so-called *real* world. This assumption entails a correspondence or an instrumental theory of truth.

Imagine somebody believing "that X", with X being some state of affairs, e.g. "the earth is round". The proposition "that X" refers to an object whose properties or attributes can be described in terms of geometry, physics or some other language. This belief can be attributed a
truth value, it may be true or not, given that the earth is round by some qualified description, or as false as the belief "My friend John has dark hair", given that my friend John does not have dark hair. Additionally, this proposition can become an instrumental belief if it ensues an action, e.g. undertaking a journey, which is based on the belief. Believing that the earth is round and travelling a straight route, I shall arrive at the same geographical point from which I departed. If the earth in fact was flat, the attempted journey would fail. "The truth condition of any belief is that condition which guarantees that actions based on that belief will succeed" (Papineau, 1990, p. 27), a condition which holds for the conceptualisation of beliefs within the social cognition paradigm.

Similarly, if we analyse the truth condition of representations defined as an ensemble of beliefs and cognitions, the same argument should hold. Such a definition is suggested, for example, by the term <individual social representations> which are an amalgam of conventional and privatised socially received knowledge of individuals (Cranach, 1992, p. 10f), or as an "ensemble complexe et ordonné comprenant des éléments informatifs, cognitifs, idéologiques, normatifs, des croyances, des valeurs, des opinions, images, attitudes, etc." (Jodelet, 1984, p. 17), or as a unit of related propositions, a theory-like structure (Wagner, 1994c, p. 133) in the minds of the people. Defining representations as ensembles of beliefs, cognitions, propositions and knowledge, these representations are true, if their elements, the beliefs, cognitions, propositions and bits of knowledge are true (Papineau, 1990, p. 27). "If an agent were to act on [these beliefs], the ensuing action[s] would succeed" (p. 29).

Note that the applicability of the truth criterion of correspondence does neither depend on whether we speak of single cognitions or of ensembles of beliefs, nor does it depend on whether these cognitions are conventional or not. A belief in the roundness of the earth is completely conventional, no normal person ever checked it him or herself. It does, however, depend on an underlying philosophy about the existence of objects as independent entities with actor independent attributes "which would be registered on mechanical recording devices." (Ostrom, 1984, p. 9) This attached ontological commitment is indispensable for establishing correspondence between the contents of a belief or the success of an action ensuing from a belief, and the attributes of an object or phenomenon.
The truth of assertions in discourse

Let us now look closer at what the evidence for correspondence or the success of an action might be. In the case of a journey based on the instrumental belief of the earth being round, it is geographical and physical measurement. So far so good; but what about determining evidence for the success of a psychotherapeutic intervention? Evidence for neurosis and psychic normality can hardly be found in physical measurement. If a psychotherapeutic intervention is considered successful the evidence lies in the agreement of experts in psycho-diagnosis or physicians. Less physical evidence, if at all, can obviously be given for the success of an action based on a belief in justice. Here, again, evidence is achieved by the judgements of experts in ethics or law. What all three forms of evidence, physical measurement, psycho-diagnosis and an expertise in ethics or law, have in common is that they are legitimised by a society's consensus on what constitutes evidence in different realms of social life. This consensus legitimises physical science to provide evidence for the truth of propositions of the type "The earth is round", psychological science to provide evidence for the truth of propositions of the type "This person is not neurotic", and a judge's or priest's verdict to provide evidence for the truth of propositions of the type "This was a just action". A correspondence theoretical or a success oriented definition of truth, hence, is subordinate and secondary to a definition of what constitutes legitimate evidence in a social group, society or culture.

The truth of propositions becomes entirely dependent on what constitutes the truth of evidence. It is obvious that truth in correspondence– or instrumental success–theoretical terms does make perfect sense if we do conceive of representations as sets of beliefs and knowledge in a wider social perspective. Under this wider perspective truth becomes visible as a discursive phenomenon as dealt with in Habermas' (1973) discursive theory of truth. This concept probably comes closest to what Moscovici (1988, p. 233) calls "fiduciary truth, which is generated by the trust we place in information and judgements when we share them with other people".

According to Habermas (1973, 1981), communicative action ought to be distinguished from discourse. The problem of the truth of assertions arises only in discourse and not in communicative action, which should not concern us now. Discourse, in Habermas' view, is free
of the need to act overtly and hence susceptible to argument and contradiction. Here, in discourse, claims are challenged and called upon to being justified. Evidence is created not by virtue of experiences but by the course of argumentation. Truth, hence, resides in the power of assertions and in the consequent realisation of assertive claims in the run of a discourse and finally in any consensus reached (Habermas 1973, p. 218). Truth means "warranted assertibility" (p. 240; Habermas, 1981, p. 44ff).

Applied to social representation, a discursive criterion of truth is feasible in the socio-genesis of representations, in the "unceasing babble" in society (Moscovici, 1984) whereby representations are formed and transformed, in fact socially constructed in and by the public (Jovchelovitch, 1995)—as "pensée constituée" (e.g. Guerin, 1995, p. 207; 1992). It becomes specifically relevant in times of social change where old world views and representations are challenged and new ones adopted by an "aesthetic" consensus, i.e. "whether an image [or metaphor] is accepted or not by a group is neither the problem of truth nor an arbitrary choice, but determined by the group members' experiential world and the associated collective aesthetics." (Wagner, Elejabarrieta & Lahnsteiner, in press) This general level of a collective aesthetics warrants the assertibility of ideas even beyond their logical and discursive coherence.

When opinions, images, metaphors and ideologies are disputed and traded on the marketplace of discourse and eventually become collectively adopted, this is simultaneously a dispute and power struggle about their associated sources of evidence (cf. Joffe, 1995, for an example in AIDS research). Psychoanalytic theory would not at all have had the impact it actually had in France in the fifties if it was not attributed to Freud, i.e. to a realm considered scientific, but to any other less "evidential" source. Also, much of everyday argument revolves around the sources of beliefs and is much less concerned with the contents of beliefs. A belief is warranted assertible exactly if there exists consensus about the source of evidence which is called on.

Social representations have repeatedly been qualified as not being susceptible to a formal criterion of truth, falsification and verification, because of their conventional character (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990, p. 2; Moscovici, 1988; Wagner, 1994c, p. 133). This needs to be qualified. In the light of the foregoing argument the problem of the veridicality of a representation—as well
as of cognitions—is entirely intrinsic to the groups developing or holding this representation or belief system. This is the consequence of representations being formed by collective discursive processes where assertions are open to being challenged and socially warranted evidence is demanded by opposing groups, as for example in "polemical" representations (Moscovici, 1988, p. 221f).

From an anthropological, i.e. from an outsider's perspective the problem of whether a representation may be true or not does not arise. There exists no other socially relevant truth criterion for any group's representations than the group's own evidence which is discursively determined.

In the antecedent chapter I have shown that object talk, i.e. thinking in terms of the subject–object–interaction triad is part of common-sensical, hence group specific thinking. Object talk, i.e. talking of representations of an object, implies truth talk. Truth talk, I have shown in the present chapter to be also intrinsic to groups. The anthropologist has no other access to an object of a representation than via this very representation. Because of this, for the anthropologist it does not make sense to judge the veridicality of a representation other than by what the very group agrees upon in its discourse and practice (Wittgenstein, 1982, Vol. 1, §548); Representations exist as a part of a local world. But what "being part of a local world" exactly means, and what its consequences for language use in the social representation approach are will be dealt with in a later chapter.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS ARE THE OBJECTS THEY SEEM TO REPRESENT

There is hardly anybody who would deny that the vast majority, if not all, of our knowledge is socially elaborated, hence constructed by and within social processes. Knowledge, even seemingly idiosyncratic and personal knowledge and beliefs derive basically from social institutions, like school, media and other forms of communication processes. This applies to the proposition "the earth is round"—no man or woman on the street ever attained this knowledge other than from educational institutions—but also to such propositions as "my flat is on the third floor". This latter knowledge or belief is only made possible by a presupposed and socially attained knowledge about houses, floors and flats, and maybe also about staircases and
elevators. "Perceivers create and construct the information in addition to the ways they process that information" (Snyder, Tanke & Berscheid, 1977, p. 664) is a not uncommon statement in social cognition. Social representation's scope, however, is wider. The "pensée constitué" side is necessary but not sufficient in a constructionist approach.

Let us imagine (a) that there is an "object" $O_1$, say a person in a wheelchair, (b) that this person $O_1$ lives in a group $G_1$, (c) that in this group $G_1$ there exists a certain understanding of what a person in a wheelchair is like, i.e. its representation of the "object" $O_1$, and (d) that a person $P$ pertains to this group and shares this representation. The representation of $G_1$ is, e.g., that a person in a wheelchair is a person impaired in her bodily functions, specifically in his or her ability to walk, and that such persons deserve compassion because of their deplorable condition. How will person $P$ interact with $O_1$? Well, without going into the details, his behaviour towards $O_1$ will probably reflect compassion, helpfulness and caring. Let us call this an event $P-O$.

Let us further imagine another group $G_2$ and a member of this group $Q$. In this group there exists a representation of the form that a person in a wheelchair is a "differently abled" person, but certainly not a deplorable handicapped. This representation implies that a person in a wheelchair may be impaired in some bodily functions, e.g. in walking, but better able to perform other functions than you and me. How will $Q$ interact with $O_2$? Probably $Q$'s interaction will look quite different to $P$'s. He may approach the person in the wheelchair in an air of equality, converse with him or her on equal terms and not exhibit signs of obtrusive helpfulness, e.g. by moving the wheelchair etc. Let us call this an event $Q-O$.

One may say, and this is probably the most spontaneous interpretation that appears to most of us, that $O$, the person in the wheelchair is basically the same on both occasions and that we observe just a different style of interaction, in the sense that $P$ exhibits an overtly helping attitude towards $O$ whereas $Q$ does not. But is $O$ really the same in both events? That is, is it not that a person in the wheelchair, though physically identical, becomes two different objects in the course of both interactions? In the case of the event $P-O$, $O$ might behave as a person in need of help, accepting the offer by $P$ to move her around and to be pitied. Is this the same object as $O$...
in the event Q-O, where both interacting people, Q and O, engage in a completely different line of behaviours?\textsuperscript{13}

Well, it is and it is not the same category of objects. On the one hand, it is the same object if we employ a third frame of description, for example a medical one, which depicts this person in the general context of medical health and impairment and which decontextualizes O from his or her life-space. In the social context, on the other hand, we are in fact observing a doubling of the object in the sense that there are suddenly two virtual objects, i.e. two persons in two wheelchairs. These "two persons in the wheelchair" differ in the way of how P and Q approach the person, and at how O reacts toward P and Q. This virtual doubling of the object may even become visible in a fictive situation where P and Q approach one and the same person O. Then the person in the wheelchair might feel confused by the two contradicting attitudes toward her and finally withdraw.

For a proper event P-O to come about in this scenario, it is necessary that O shares P's representation of being in a deplorable state and not as bodily able as P. Equally, for an orderly event Q-O to come about, it is necessary that O shares Q's representation of herself being "differently abled" and not qualifying for being pitied. People fit into or belong to a social reality "only if the others around them are prepared to respond to what they do and say seriously" (emphasis in the original); that is if they are treated as a proper participant in that reality (Shotter, 1993, p. 39). As soon as we acknowledge this argument, in a constructionist view, it does not make sense (a) to talk about an object O, because objects are supposed to exhibit certain stable attributes; this is not the case with social objects. Nor does it make sense (b) to talk about an actor possessing certain attributes, e.g. a representation or a belief, if this attribute melts together with his or her doing and with the reaction of the object or person interacted with.

In a study on how the newly introduced term <African American> becomes naturalised in US-American everyday practice, Philogène (1994, 1995) illustrates precisely this point. The "object" of this developing representation, the black Americans\textsuperscript{14}, transforms and attains new attributes and different feelings and self-esteem than before, when "it" was labelled differently. If one may cautiously extrapolate the present data: once this labelling reifies to a full-fledged
social representation in the near future, the now "Blacks" will have become a different "object"—not the same "object" with another label—and they will not have much in common with the then "African Americans". What matters is the representation "affecting the object".

The reason why the object cannot be named independent from the interacting persons is that it simply does not exist in any socially meaningful form independent from a social actor. Even social cognition researchers' attempt to characterise an object by "description … from the perspective of non-social objects" (Ostrom, 1984, p. 9) is an instantiation of the "object" within a specific scientific description. The scientific convention creates the illusion that an object remains the same thing across different situations and beyond the social world. Describing an object in terms of its physical, technical and chemical properties in the language of physics, mechanics and chemistry, hides the fact that also the languages of physics, mechanics and chemistry are conventional, constructed forms of descriptions, albeit not exactly equivalent to descriptions in terms of social representations.

The object in social representation exists, one is tempted to say, in a kind of intermediate state, between (social) non-existence, "nothingness", and being anything it may in different constructive contexts, just like Schrödinger's "quantum cat" in its indeterminate, intermediate state of being neither alive nor dead, if you allow me this metaphor. In the same sense as one cannot say that Schrödinger's cat possesses the attribute <being alive> or <being dead> without us opening its cage, i.e. when we observe it, an object existing outside of any actor's doings exists virtually in several possible forms of interpretation and with different potential attributes. In a fictive non-social realm objects or things are just something in the world (cf. Habermas, 1973, p. 215). In the social realm of representation and construction they become specific "objects" by being interacted with or by being talked about. Figure 1 schematically depicts the idea of multiple realities of social objects.

In ontological terms the representation is the object whose name it bears. The potentially multiple reality of the "somethings" in the world implies that they become what they socially are, i.e. a specific object X, only by virtue of an individual or collective actor's joint doings. These doings establish a social relationship with the "somethings" according to the prevailing
representations. Only then the "something" receives a name (is categorised) and is provided with those attributes which are relevant for a specific group. By lending its name to the something, the representation attains reality. By the same token, a something is recognised as the object X by borrowing the name of the representation. Hence, from the analytical perspective of the social representation approach, it is the representation which has a specific name and not the object which, beyond the representation, is just a something. Consider again the aforementioned example. In P's group the "something" called <person in a wheelchair> under a medical description is named <handicapped> as soon as P establishes a relationship with her. In Q's group the "something" <person in a wheelchair> is named <differently abled> as soon as Q establishes a relationship with her. The <person in a wheelchair> "something" becomes objectified to a handicapped person or to a differently abled person, depending on which of the two events P-O or Q-O occurs. The handicapped person is in fact a completely different entity than the differently abled person, they neither share the name or category, nor attributes which are socially relevant in everyday life; not even a staircase, in fact, will necessarily call attention to similarities because this hurdle will be taken quite differently in the situation P-O than in Q-O.

A representation is the conceptual "cookie" cut out of the world-"dough" by virtue of discourse, consensus and social behaviour (Putnam, 1988). According to the present reasoning there is not much sense in talking about the social representation of handicap or of persons in a wheelchair, since it is the representation which carries the name and which lends its name to the something in the world which then, i.e. in a social context, appears as an object with a socially meaningful name. The ways of talking in social life give or lend form, structure and names to the world (cf. Shotter 1993, p. 36). In this sense representations are the specific forms and names a group or society gives to certain areas of its world. This world of somethings must not necessarily be describable in physical terms. Even physical "nothings", like God, justice, democracy, love, etc. constitute relevant areas in social worlds.

IS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION ACTION?

Acting and doing
At the present point we need to distinguish between acting and doing. An intentional act is one of which "its perpetrator knows, or believes, will have some quality or outcome and where such knowledge is utilised … to achieve this quality or outcome." (Giddens, 1984, p. 10) Doing, though not uncoordinated and erratic, lacks the explicit intentional quality. It is conventional, but not necessarily mechanical or automatized behaviour.

As soon as a pool of tradition and representations exists more or less consensually in a group, social actors do not engage in their social interactions with others and with the somethings in their world because they want or intend to construct an object. It clearly does not make sense to say that group G or an individual intends to construct the "object" of a <differently abled person> in their local world. Social construction is always an unintended process. Constructing a socially significant "object" is what a group or its members do and not what they intend to do after having contemplated about it; construction happens, it is an event. This is why for our purpose I prefer the de-personalised and de-intentionalized term <constructive event> for talking about social construction or the "pensée constitutante" side of representations.¹⁶

What I have discussed in the foregoing chapter is a "constructive event". A constructive event is an event in the course of which a something in the world is named, equipped with attributes and values, and integrated into a socially meaningful world. It becomes a social object only within the group's system of common-sense in the course of the interactions in which actors, pertaining to a group and sharing a common representation with regard to what is relevant in a given context, engage in. These interactions may be bodily or verbal or both and they are expressions of and inseparable from the shared representation (cf. Wagner, 1994a). "Thinking and arguing [i.e. acting] amount to the same thing." (Moscovici, 1988, p.215) This is also what Himmelweit (1990, p. 30) calls for: "a social representation worth studying is one that makes a noticeable difference to the reactions of those accepting the representation compared with their beliefs and conduct before such acceptance.".

There are not different social representations of one and the same object, say for example, of physically handicapped people. There are only different representations, full stop; there are different representations, one of which is called <differently abled people>, the other
and perhaps a third <people with a tragic fate> representation. In the aforementioned example we do not have a <differently abled people> representation, plus another <handicapped people> representation of the object <persons in a wheelchair>, not even two representations and two ensuing objects, but only two representations, one being called <differently abled people–representation> and the other <handicapped people–representation>. There is no object common to the two. These representations are realised in a constructive event and this event simultaneously creates the "object". Speaking of an object independent of the representation, such as saying "there are various representations R₁ to Rₙ of the object X", does not make sense, since representation and "object" are ontologically indistinguishable within the constructive event.

As paradox as it may sound, there is no object resulting from a constructive event. What is constructed is not an object but once more an evidence for the intrinsic "truth" of a specific world view in a long series of ongoing equivalent performances. There is no need at all to justify such evidence: "Die Begründung aber, die Rechtfertigung der Evidenz kommt zu einem Ende;—das Ende aber ist nicht, daß uns gewisse Sätze unmittelbar als wahr einleuchten, … sondern unser Handeln, welches im Grunde des Sprachspiels liegt. […] the end of justifying the evidence is not that we see certain propositions suddenly as true, but our doing which lies at the bottom of the language-game]." (Wittgenstein, 1984, § 204)

The significant meaning in constructive events

Constructionist research on social representations provides us with an account of social representations not as things in the minds of people. It provides us with accounts of representation as the significant structure (Goldman, 1966, p. 121f) which is exhibited in a series of constructive events (cf. Duveen & Lloyd, 1990, p. 5). In other words it refers to the "meaning in structuring the interaction between a person and a context." (Harré & Gillet, 1994, p. 23) It is the result of the interpretative work done by the researcher who observes socially relevant events in talk and other behaviour between people. What appears as a relative constant across different contexts and people in a group makes up the representation. This interpretative work is quite demanding because it means to compare and bridge, the different realms of events,
talk, bodily behaviour, single persons, institutions, etc. which are methodologically disparate realms (cf. Wassmann, 1995, p. 171). Social life is always in the making by constructive events. Representations in the present view are the convergent meanings derived from thick descriptions of events at a specific time in a group's history.

It is only in a constructive event that a researcher sees what the world of a person and its group is like. Such events can be observed when they naturally occur within the "life-scape" of a group, or by engaging people in the most normal social activity, i.e. a conversation, as it happens in an interview, or in a most unnatural social activity, as for example filling out a questionnaire. The social reality, or what is taken as such, does not speak by itself. Its "so being" is disclosed only in a constructive event. It is in such events that social representation appears as an environment to everyday people (Moscovici, 1984, p. 23). For social science research <social representation> is a heuristically rich concept to capture the significant meaning in certain constructive processes primarily in the modern social world and civil society. These processes may be in symbolic, iconic or any other form. They are assessable either as spontaneous talk or as forms of doing, both of which can be seen as constructive events in the strict sense of the term; and their empirical content will always tend toward the "hot" side (Moscovici, 1988, p. 237) as Wagner, Valencia and Elejabarrieta (no date) have shown in a study on stable core elements of <peace> and <war> representations in different countries.

Just like people in the adult world, children engaged in play spontaneously stage a gender-typed world. They do not reflect about which game or toy is male or female, nor do they intentionally act to make their world gender-typed: they simply do it. In the moment they become "engulfed" by the representation <gender>, children adequately re-construct their world in their words, preferences for toys, and body use in terms of this representation. Much clearer than socio-genesis, the ontogenesis of representations shows the intricate unity of attainment and simultaneous world-construction in social representation. The meanings the researcher extracts from the many varied constructive events produced by children in their play converge toward the significant core of the social representation <gender> (Duveen, 1994; Lloyd & Duveen, 1992). To paraphrase Wittgenstein's "die Bedeutung eines Wortes ist sein Gebrauch in der Sprache [the meaning of a word is its use in language]" (1969, § 43), the meaning of doings resides in
their representation. Just as language is neither a property of individuals or groups nor an object in the world, representations are not the property of individuals or groups, but their immaterial environment. Moscovici (1992) probably hints at this aspect when he says that "there is nothing in representation which is not in reality, except the representation itself" (p. 141).

Of course, there also exist events, probably not the majority though, which are not social constructions at first sight. Such events, erupting volcanoes, a natural catastrophe, a gun shot, etc. affect people and impose themselves forcefully on their lives by ways different from social construction and negotiation. Other examples are unintended consequences or side-effects of collective action, as, for example, an economic breakdown, etc. Such events require that the affected group collectively copes with them by making "the unfamiliar familiar" (Moscovici, 1984, p. 28). Collective coping will be first symbolically and then materially. At the symbolic level it consists in initiating a comprehensive discourse to anchor the event and then to develop a system of meanings which allows to assign the event a place in the group's social world.

A good example is Festinger, Riecken and Schachter's (1956) analysis of a religious sect's coping with the fact that apocalypse did not happen as they had expected. Consequently the sect had to re-negotiate and simultaneously re-construct its world.

A still better example, the development of the social representation <public sphere>, was investigated by Jovchelovitch (1995). The author shows convincingly how historical and economic processes led to "the progressive growth of an intimate space indoors, with its boundaries set by the patriarchal family, that engenders … the public as a dimension of otherness." (p. 95) The coming into being of the new form of modern public life was the collective sum of a near infinite number of constructive events happening within society. The developing public sphere was not an "object" waiting to be mastered symbolically by a group—as object-talk suggests—but must be identified with the developing social representation itself. Once it turns into an all-encompassing environment, the social representation perpetually confirms its evidence via constructive events.

**Discursive psychology implies social representation**
Let me add a short note on discourse analysis at this point. Discursive psychology maintains that people's talk in social interaction is the ultimate datum for a truly social psychology. Scientific accounts of discourse require "no special explanation internal to actors" (Edwards & Potter, 1993, p. 148), i.e. no explanatory reference to any machinery in individual minds. Analyses of discourse, though, do require reference to consensual routines and shared understandings of legitimate accounts and of what constitutes the local world. This world is rarely constructed anew, but re-constructed and re-confirmed by the daily talk and doing of social subjects; this is even true in the cases of John Dean's testimony to the Watergate committee and Chancellor Lawson's defence, given by the authors as examples for their approach; it is also true for the "race-talk", "culture-talk" and "nation-talk" produced by New Zealanders in Whetherell and Potter's (1992) analysis of racism and the legitimation of exploitation.

Underlying to discursive data are the representational processes channelling the constructive events in everyday practice. This is confirmed by any discourse psychological research. Only because discourse is not an arbitrary social construction out of the void, discourse psychologists can give a coherent account of discourse's meanings in specific situations and cultural contexts. These accounts draw "upon people's knowledge of a certain body of *already formulated* [emphasis in the original] meanings in the making of its meanings" (Shotter, 1993, p. 26) notwithstanding any negotiation and "juggling" with words in everyday life about how a *specific* happening in the people's world can, ought or must be seen. Discourse research results in giving accounts of *specific* linguistic constructive events which only make sense against the background of the more stable environment of significant meanings of talk and behaviour embraced by social representation.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Before concluding allow me a comment on the post-modern attitude of equating science with common-sense. I prefer to see science and its talk as being *not completely* different from other kinds of thought and talk in everyday life. But I also do not want to equate thought and talk in science with common-sense. If science was not different from common-sense this would
mean that we are talking within common-sense about common-sense, hence questioning it. But common-sense, for it to be what it is, does not warrant its being seriously doubted or questioned. It would lose its essential characteristic as a spontaneous and taken-for-grANTED form of thought, as practice and a kind of thinking which has no reference beyond itself.

This is why I do not follow Shotter (1993) and other post-modernists in rejecting any possibility of science as such. For those, science is just talk as is any other conversation. Of course, science does not provide us with a firm stance, but at least, we hope that it provides us with a less shaky one than common-sense ever could provide. Employing the specific instruments of scientific rationality, method and logical consistency in our theoretical accounts and research does give a relative advantage over spontaneous common-sense. One may analyse common-sense, one may analyse and criticise scientific practice and its presuppositions, but one may not do both at the same time: Doing science—or what is taken as such—and at the very same time rejecting its being science.

It is a fact that we use, and often have to use, an imprecise language when talking in social science. Language forces us to use separate words for details of processes which in thinking go together and are simultaneous. This paper is no exception to the rule. It is imprecise to talk about the constructed and constructing side of representation separately. They go hand in hand. It is imprecise to talk about objects, doings and representations, while conceptually they are the same thing. However, I consider it important to show which words and related concepts used within the social representation approach obviously pertain to the local worlds of the people the approach talks about, and which concepts do not. Certain concepts have no place in talk about a social phenomenon, because they are only valid in talk within it.

The present paper poses three questions: (a) Does a social representation represent an object? (b) Can social representations be true or false? and (c) Is social construction action? In giving an answer, a plain "no" to all three, I touched some of the implicit assumptions about social construction inherent in the social representation approach. The analysis suggests that the approach may have a built in drift towards a not intended individualism by conceptualising representations as representations of an object, thereby potentially damaging its constructionist intent. It is shown that the hard divide between social cognition, attitudes, etc., on the one hand
and social representations on the other, is the constructionist side of representations as originally conceived by Moscovici. This divide is expressed by how one talks about subject and object and the associated issue of veridicality. That is, social cognition acknowledges the existence of an object with specific attributes independent from the subject, while the social representation approach does not; and social cognition upholds the issue of veridicality of cognitions which does not make sense for representation.

It is suggested to see an "object" as the *inside-view* or folk-expression for what a specific representation stands. It is also suggested to see the question of truth as depending on the local consensus about proper evidence, be it physical evidence, the insight of elders, the verdict of judges or the constellation of the stars. Therefore, the question of the truth of beliefs, or the adequacy of their evidential support, is also inherent to the local worlds. People act as they wish and do what they are used to doing; this is also what they account for in terms of what is right or not in their world.

In their view, however, people do neither construct nor represent their world. This concept as well as that of social representation is foreign to their talk. Those terms pertain to social psychological and anthropological accounts. In such accounts it is the representation, not the plain object, which counts. It is assessed as the significant meaning in constructive events which come about by virtue of the people's doings.
NOTES

1 For readers who are not well acquainted with the approach Moscovici (1984 or 1988) may serve as a basic reference.

2 In accord with Duveen and Lloyd (1990) I prefer to use the singular word "representation" instead of the plural "representations", common in the English speaking world, to avoid a premature tendency to envisage representations as things being localised somewhere in the world. Representation, in singular, has more of a processual ring to it or at least is more flexible in its use.

3 Contrary to the commonly used term "social representations theory" I favour the term approach to designate the field of social representations. I have the impression that the whole complex of conceptual thinking within the field does not constitute a consistent and well defined theory in the strict sense. The approach also encompasses a number of distinct theories on a smaller scale which are not always completely compatible with each other.

4 There exist the historically older and more general term <social constructivism> and the derivative term <social constructionism>. In the present context <constructionism> is preferred to the Piagetian flavour of <constructivism> (Doise, 1989). In contrast to some social constructionists, however, I maintain a touch of realism which social representation presupposes (Farr, 1990, p. 48f).

5 The term <representation> is used here and in the following synonymously with <social representation> except, of course, in quotations from other authors. The reason is to avoid the text being flooded by the adjective <social>.

6 I am well aware that giving quotations out of the original context may be misleading. I try to counterbalance this problem, however, in the course of the text.

7 Note that Berger and Luckmann's seminal book on the social construction of reality was first published 1966, i.e. five years after Moscovici's 1961 book on "la psychanalyse".

8 Including some of my own empirical research.
An object is "a thing ... presented to one of the senses; material thing; ... person or thing to which action ... is directed, subject of or for; ... Thing aimed at ... Thing thought of ... external thing..." (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, Sykes, 1976).

The same is true, strictly speaking, for social cognition. Social cognition's reference to physical criteria is as arbitrary as any other reference as long as it is not taken from the individuals' own everyday life space and social convention (cf. Wagner, 1994c, p. 87ff). But then it becomes intrinsic to the social life of the subjects and not to the demands set by "recording devices".

Neither here nor later, when persons are labelled "objects" in the context of the present topic, this is meant in a pejorative sense.

Which seems to be the current "politically correct" term for such a person in the US.

See also Pirttilä-Backman, 1993, pp 197ff.

<Black American> is used here as the generic term.

Due to the indeterminate character of quantum events, like the emission of a particle in radioactive processes, these events have fuzzy attributes which simultaneously do and do not exist, at least in the physicists' formulas. They seem to take on a specific attribute, either yes or no, just in the instance of being observed (see Herbert, 1987, p. 200ff).

Note that the present use of <event> is different from Shotter's (1993, p. 99ff) use. Shotter favours event-talk to counteract the tendency toward using substantives in English (and other Indo-European) languages, while I use <event> to better capture the characteristics of doing as an opposition to acting.
REFERENCES


Figure 1. Potentially multiple reality of objects as instantiations of "something".