

The symbolic structures of social life: integrative comments on the social thinking architecture

As estruturas simbólicas da vida social: comentários integrativos sobre a arquitetura do pensamento social

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ABSTRACT: The present paper is an essay that aims at contributing to the debate on the social thinking architecture, a theoretical hierarchical model originally proposed by Rouquette that establishes relations between various symbolic formations. Other than addressing the main characteristics of social thinking and the architecture, a broad review of the role of its classical constructs is presented, i.e. social representations, ideologies, attitudes, *thêmata* and opinions. A discussion about other constructs such as *nexus*, social images and collective representations and their position in the architecture is also provided.

Keywords: social thinking; social thinking architecture; structural approach; social representations; symbolic formations.

RESUMO: O presente artigo é um ensaio que visa a contribuir para o debate sobre a arquitetura do pensamento social, um modelo teórico hierárquico proposto originalmente por Rouquette que estabelece relações entre diversas formações simbólicas. Além de tratar das principais características do pensamento social e da arquitetura, uma revisão ampla do papel de seus construtos clássicos é apresentada, isto é, representações sociais, ideologias, atitudes, *thêmata* e opiniões. Uma discussão sobre outros construtos como *nexus*, imagens sociais e representações coletivas e suas posições na arquitetura também é fornecida.

Palavras-chave: pensamento social; arquitetura do pensamento social; abordagem estrutural; representações sociais; formações simbólicas.

The structural perspective of social thinking² is a well-established social psychological approach that investigates the effects of social variables in thinking and practices, by means of the characterization of structural relationships among environmental, individual and collective phenomena (Flament & Rouquette, 2003). One of the main interests of the perspective of social thinking is the study of knowledge, whether personal knowledge or knowledge shared by groups in the form of conventions (Wachelke, 2012a). Rouquette's (1973) chapter in a French social psychology handbook is usually taken as the pioneer work of social thinking as it proposed to unify a modality of thinking that people would employ in social situations, suggesting that various cognitive social psychological effects would reflect an underlying logic.

Social thinking is "social" in two ways: first it involves thinking and representing about the everyday situations of social life, in opposition to specialized, scientific thinking (Moscovici, 1976). Social thinking is about social objects, topics that involve people and are relevant to their lives. The second way concerns the fact that the social thinking approach is interested in the study of social variables (norms, culture, group knowledge) in thinking processes (Rouquette, 1988, 1998). The social thinking approach can then be considered as a

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² Other authors (e.g. Wolter, Gurrieri & Sorribas, 2009) have preferred to translate it as 'social thought'. We chose the expression 'thinking' instead, on the understanding that it might reflect more the process of thinking rather than its product, thought.

sociological form of social psychology, in Farr's (1996) terms; it posits that social factors operate as metasystems (Doise, 1989) guiding individual cognition according to social values and needs (Guimelli, 1999). Social thinking is a set of reasoning processes that are historically determined and culturally adaptive, subordinating cognition to sociability criteria and needs (Flament & Rouquette, 2003).

The conventions or codes that are shared by groups (Wachelke, 2012a) are organized in different knowledge structures with specific properties. Such collective constructs inspire various lines of research: in social science and social psychology, those forms of representation are thoroughly studied: ideologies, social representations, images, opinions. The social thinking perspective has also contributed to our understanding of those diverse symbolic formations by means of a theoretical framework that systematizes processes that are seemingly independent, through a hierarchical model: the social thinking architecture, first proposed by Rouquette (Rouquette, 1996a; Flament & Rouquette, 2003).

A paper published by Rateau, Ernst-Vintila and Delouvé (2012) in the first issue of *Psychology and Social Knowing* presented an overview of Rouquette's view of the social thinking architecture as a conceptual model that suggests links the studies about various symbolic formations and their functioning. Their paper does a fine work of presenting a conception that may be viewed as "classical" regarding the architecture and its connections and assumptions related to the social thinking approach. However, we feel that there is still much space to refine the understanding of the architecture model, review a broader set of research related to it and discuss the inclusion and position of other symbolic social formations in order to grasp its full integrative potential.

The present paper aims at providing such a view and hopefully contributing to advance the debate on the model. We begin by reintroducing in more detail the basic notions that define the architecture and the classical symbolic formations that have been included in the model. After that, we try to add our own input to the matter, expanding the discussion to the specific position of some constructs that are not commonly included in the architecture, such as *nexus*, collective representations or social images.

Social thinking structures: the architecture

Social thinking processes result in different modalities of structured symbolic formations, each with different properties. Wolter and Gurrieri (2007) suggested that it is possible to classify those formations through the analysis of property differences. According to these authors, five dimensions are to be taken into account: structuring degree, connection to practices, temporal stability, object salience, and degree with which it is shared by people, providing a useful coordinate system to guide a taxonomical effort.

There are various symbolic formations that are object of study within the social thinking perspective, each a product derived from social thinking processes, and covering a different aspect of social knowledge. The social thinking architecture is the superstructure that tries to interconnect those symbolic formations. In such a structure, different levels of analysis (Doise, 1982) come into relation, as there is a hierarchy of symbolic formations: broader, more widely shared and more stable structures provide a framework for smaller-scale ones; lower-level formations find their coherence and possibility conditions within the enclosure of higher-level structures. That is why it is called a hierarchy of nested reasons

(Rouquette, 1998). Such architecture opposes formations from a wide collective level, with a high level of integration and small interpersonal variability, to a more particularized one, more specific and heterogeneous (Rouquette, 1998; Rouquette & Rateau, 1998; Flament & Rouquette, 2003).

The most individualized formations related to social thinking are opinions. According to the social thinking model, an opinion is an attribution regarding a specific occurrence of a social object (Rouquette, 1998). As there are potentially infinite occurrences of objects, and as attributions can connect to an equally indefinite number of aspects, opinions can vary greatly from person to person. Likewise, they can be transformed easily through environmental changes. A second symbolic formation is the attitude, an affective disposition concerning an object class, rather than a specimen. Attitudes generate and manage sets of opinions, being more stable and resistant to change than the latter³. Also, they are shared within a group, whereas opinions can be multiple (Rouquette, 1998; Flament & Rouquette, 2003).

The justifications and reasons behind attitudes are based upon specific aspects of shared knowledge structures about more general social objects. That kind of symbolic formation is called social representation. In Codol's (1969) terms, a representation is a structured set of cognems directed to an object. When the object is social in nature and the representation structure is shared by a group, it is actually a social representation. Flament and Rouquette (2003), therefore, define a social representation as a set of cognitive elements linked by relations and directed to a social object, with both elements and relations finding their legitimacy within a group. A social representation is formed by two systems of cognems: a central core that is shared, indicating the main definitions and norms regarding the object, and a peripheral system that is more flexible and specific (Abric, 1994a).

Later developments of central core theory inspired by experimental data (Rateau, 1995a, 1995b; Lheureux, Rateau & Guimelli, 2008) indicate that every social representation element has a double component nature, each one related to a possible role performed by it in a relationship with the social representation object: there is a semantic component that defines specific cases of the representation object; and an evaluative component that judges the quality of specific cases. Therefore, each social representation constitutes a reading grid of reality that helps people classify events and things that they come across in their everyday lives; in other words, each social representation includes a categorization system. Central elements, due to their consensual nature, provide the basic guidelines to identify the occurrence of an object (semantic component), and the norms according to which it is to be evaluated (evaluative components); after that fundamental framing process, conditional elements from the peripheral system are activated to guide pertinent practices.

Social representations belong to a more collective level of the architecture, and thus cannot be traced to a single individual. A social representation is most often stable, but it adapts to context changes and evolves historically, following natural dynamics. It is generated, negotiated and maintained within a group, through interpersonal and mass communication. In the model of social thinking architecture, it is through a social

³ Please note that the presented definition of attitude does not refer to mainstream attitude theories (e.g. Crano & Prislin, 2008).

representation that group membership acts on people's beliefs about social objects. When it comes to making sense of events and aspects of social life, a person's community is the source of explanations, descriptions and justifications. A social representation is a key formation in the architecture because it provides the guidelines for people to interpret situations of everyday life linked to salient themes, fitting them into familiar schemes. Finally, it is a practical knowledge: some cognems guide practices related to the social object of interest (Moscovici, 1976; Jodelet, 1989; Flament, 1987; Rouquette, 1988, 1998; Abric, 1994b; Rouquette & Guimelli, 1994; Moliner, 1998).

Social representations are the most widely studied symbolic formations related to social thinking and more specifically in the structural approach on social thinking. For a more detailed understanding of the current theoretical perspectives of structural research on social representations that is compatible with the social thinking approach described here, see Flament and Rouquette (2003) and Wachelke (2012b).

Going up in the model of the architecture, the group knowledge of social representations is subordinate to very stable abstract formations called ideologies. In this sense, an ideology guides the structuring of sets of social representations. Whereas a social representation refers to an object, an ideology refers more widely to classes of social objects. Additionally, while a representation is a practical type of knowledge that decodes an object to a group, an ideology is highly abstract and diffuse: it has no specific 'content'; rather, it is a set of cognitive constraints that directs thinking processes. Moreover, while a representation is shared by a group, an ideology regulates the thinking of a whole society (Rouquette, 1996a, 1998; Flament & Rouquette, 2003).

It derives from such relationships that the constraints contained in ideologies end up as defining sources of the characteristics of social thinking, i.e., the logic that commands social thinking processes (Guimelli, 1999). As a result, the social thinking operations that are unveiled by research are certainly not 'natural', but a product of the values of a specific society of masses that legitimate and circulate core values through public communication systems (Rouquette, 1988, 1994). In other words, if the organization of society were different, so would social thinking be.

Through the operationalization of ideologies as 'world views' such as catholic and communist ideologies or 'evil vs. good', some studies have already found empirical support for the dependency relationships of the cognitive hierarchy. Rateau (2000) demonstrated that a change of representational grid implies a change in attitudes, and that representations that are compatible with one's ideological beliefs are legitimated, while opposing representations are rejected. A recent study by Wolter, Gurrieri and Sorribas (2009) verified that different ideologies corresponded to different representation structures and contrasting attitudes.

Some other formations also belong to the ideological level of the architecture, but due to difficult research operationalization, they remain mostly as theoretical hypotheses. Such is the case of the *thêmata*, long duration source ideas structured as oppositions, located at the uppermost levels of the cognitive architecture, able to provide a framework for ideologies and representation families. Such formations would 'shape' lower-level structures, which would thus be seen as new instances of pre-existing archetypes (Moscovici & Vignaux, 1994; Rouquette, 1996b). Even if the structure of *thêmata* is still unclear, some studies have already incorporated this type of ideological opposition and identified related

effects (Gurrieri, 2007; Feertchak & Gamby-Mas, 2009), which means that it is a promising possibility for further theoretical and methodological consideration.

The blurred corners of the building: nexus, social memories, social images

Additionally, there are studies on formations with still imprecise positions in the architecture. The *nexus* are widely shared affective formations associated with masses and responsible for collective behavior. A *nexus* relates directly to ideological contents, through highly polarized affect that influences reasoning. Just like ideologies, the *nexus* are potentially shared by a whole community, but they are not discussed by its members; rather, they are taken for granted. Due to an affective nature, *nexus* do not possess an elaborate cognitive structure. A specific characteristic of *nexus* is that they are associated with or activated by very particular words or symbols, and also at a particular temporal context (Wolter, 2008) in which those symbols are linked to basic values; in other words, it is as if a very few portions of social reality become the direct targets of ideological norms (Rouquette, 1988, 1994). Currently, there is no consensus on whether a *nexus* is a symbolic formation on its own or a concept that refers to social representation states that become affectively charged in a given temporal context (Wolter, 2009). Empirical *nexus* effects have been supported by research results on the homogenization of groups regarding a *nexus* object (Campos & Rouquette, 2000; Lo Monaco, Rateau & Guimelli, 2007), on strong affective approval or rejection of *nexus* object labels compared to 'neutral' labels (Rouquette, 1994; Wolter, 2011; Wolter & Rouquette, 2006); on reasoning and object recognition (Lo Monaco, Rateau & Guimelli, 2007; Wolter & Rouquette, 2010) and on declared intention to act regarding a *nexus* object (Wolter & Rouquette, 2006).

At the representational level, there are the collective representations (Durkheim, 1898). Such knowledge formations can be operationalized similarly to social representations; their distinction lies on the degree with which each representation type is shared. Whereas a social representation is specific to a social group, a collective one is common to larger social segments, potentially a whole community (Rouquette, 1994; Rouquette & Rateau, 1998; Flament & Rouquette, 2003). Some authors hold the position that while collective representations were predominant in the past, they have recently given space to social representations, supposedly more pertinent after the emergence of mass communication and the division of social roles (Moscovici, 1976). Nevertheless, it is a useful theoretical construction in contexts in which knowledge on a grand social object is shared to a large extent, such as widely shared representations as the belief in a just world and the opposition between individualism and collectivism (Deschamps & Moliner, 2008). The structural characterization of collective representations has not been particularly studied; however, due to conceptual similarities of social and collective representations it might be parsimonious to extend the understanding of many of the processes of the former to the latter.

A more recent field of research proposes the study of memory through a social thinking approach; as such, the interest of study lies on the influence of social variables on the recollection of the past (Sá, 2007; Rateau, 2009). Social memories are then investigated as representations of past events and characters (Moller, Sá & Bezerra, 2003; Pecora & Sá, 2008).

There are developments also on the more individual pole of the architecture. Singery-Bensaid (1984) observed that the perceptions of people regarding restricted objects were mainly composed by descriptions, evaluations and examples, but did not show signs of organization. Rather, those perceptions, called images by the author, were organized around the criteria provided by the social representations of more global and categorical social objects. Moliner (1996) developed the concept of social image theoretically, defining it as the result of a categorization of a specimen, with criteria defined by a related social representation; it is the set of characteristics and properties that people assign to an object, based on guidelines that are consensual within a group. A social image can be changed relatively easy with new information, and every object could be potentially linked to a social image, as long as that object is also pertinent to a social object covered by a social representation. The concept of social image allows for an understanding of how social representation knowledge affects individual categorization of specific or subordinate occurrences of representation objects. Experimental results from the author indicate that it is possible to induce changes in social images through acting upon the image itself, through inducing different representational reading grids or through interfering with the categorization process. It is easier to manage and transform social images than social representations, and that opens possibilities for applied research (e.g. Tafani, Haguel & Menager, 2007).

The position of social images in the architecture has not been explicitly defined in the literature. However, Moliner's (1996) results demonstrate that social images are constructed around social representation structures, and that different social images can be compared and traced to a same representation. Therefore, social images are situated at the level immediately below social representations in the architecture; a set of social images is organized by a social representation.

The solution of the position of social images in the architecture introduces a new problem, though: how are they related to attitudes? Are social images above attitudes, or do both formations share the same level in the hierarchy? Trying to put either above the other would mean taking away the structuring status of social representations on the model. On the other hand, it makes theoretical sense to put either immediately above opinions; a set of opinions might be supported either by an attitude or by a social image, which leads to think that one of them is not necessary in the model. So which one should be included in the social thinking hierarchy?

Our position is that it should be social image, mostly because the concept of attitude in social thinking literature is somewhat ambiguous. Even though some works seem to clearly assign a cognitive component to attitudes, especially in the context of the hierarchy (e.g. Rouquette, 1996a; Flament & Rouquette, 2003), most of the time only its affective nature is taken into account by empirical studies (Moscovici, 1976; Moliner, Joule & Flament, 1995; Tafani, 2001; Tafani & Souchet, 2001; Guimelli & Abric, 2007; Wolter, Gurrieri & Sorribas, 2009). Research results indicate that attitudes on an object are actually based on judgments concerning representation elements about that object; therefore, social representation cognems consist of the supporting information for attitudes, and attitude changes involve transforming evaluative components associated with peripheral elements (Moliner & Tafani, 1997). It would be more suitable, then, to take into account an affective or evaluative dimension of social representations (Rateau, 1995c; Moliner, 1995; Campos & Rouquette, 2000, 2003), than to refer to the concept of attitude. In that specific case, the concept of

attitude might be basically suppressed from the theoretical framework of social thinking, replaced on studies by a lighter notion like affective positioning or loading, indicating the degree and polarization of the activation of affect associated with a symbolic formation, whether ideology, representation, social image or opinion. We believe that this understanding of “attitudes” within social thinking research is more coherent with the methodological decisions taken in research from the field than to keep it as a symbolic formation that would simply look like a minor social representation; this also contributes to the decision of not considering social images and attitudes as two symbolic formations situated at the same architectural level.

Final remarks

The social thinking architecture, other than being an elegant solution to bring together research on different shared symbolic formations, has the potential of consisting in one of the main theoretical and conceptual axes to organize social thinking research. In order for that to happen, inevitably constructs and research results have to be compared, discrepancies must be analyzed and the model will have to be continuously revised to acquire greater cohesion. A possible unification of theories on the symbolic formations of the architecture shall promote considerable advances in the understanding on the structuring and conversion of different aggregation levels of knowledge in the individual – social *continuum* and open new and productive paths for research. We hope that this essay can be another small step in that direction.

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