

ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКИЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

EDUCATIONAL AND PEDAGOGICAL STUDIES

UDC 378.14

ATTRACTING FOREIGN STUDENTS TO RUSSIAN UNIVERSITIES: THE KEY IN SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OUTSIDE HIGHER EDUCATION

Fabrice S.N. Fosso

Universities still struggle with the ebbs and flows consisting of attracting, retaining and understanding foreign students. Too much focus is put on opinions and statistics around foreign students, which a majority of universities pursue via surveys on their perception of the quality of teaching, their adaptation, or performance appraisal. An approach which is questionable from a sociological point of view, and can be described as a faux pas given that those opinions are taken in most cases out of their contexts and devoid of adequate methods to identify or analyze such opinions, which I argue are mostly influenced by factors outside higher education itself. Therefore, this article suggests the theory of Social Representations (SRs), and some theoretical suggestions to fill the gap related to investigations on foreign students.

Keywords: *Social Representations; Foreign students.*

Introduction

It is still unclear whether social representations theory can be described as such, or as a paradigm or concept within social sciences given that it has been portrayed both as pervasive and flexible, especially if

one looks at the number of publications and fields in social sciences using the theory on the Web of Science (WoS). However, no matter which categorization one wishes to assign to them, this does not remove the fact that they allow an approach from the symbolic point of view [11] [9], which is vital for the analysis of meanings emanating from a society.

1. From Durkheim to Moscovici

The notion first emerged with Durkheim, in an attempt to establish sociology as a social science which foundation lies in social facts; but also, to distance it from other social sciences such as biology, psychology and philosophy. Hence, it was important for him to define what a social fact was and was not. According to Durkheim, it is not because a fact is general that it is social, it is because it is social that it is general. And if it is generalized, it is not because of a reciprocal imitation of individuals, is simply because of the second criterion: that is, because it imposes itself on the individuals of a society. To illustrate it, it is not because a way of dressing in a society is general that it constitutes fashion; On the contrary, it is because of fashion that individuals mostly dress in this way, thus, fashion is imposed from the outside on individuals. He also tried to find scientific methods which systematically could have helped him analyze social facts, therefore, putting sociology where he always wished, thus, facing less criticism.

Moreover, he himself recognized the struggle to analyze them, and saw a recurrent question, how to identify a social fact? Which he answered throughout his two arguments on that matter: 1) the forms of crystallization of the social fact, particularly through language such as proverbs, moral rules, legal laws, etc; and 2) the systematic process by which the sociologist can filter the social fact being studied and highlight relations between social events, i.e. the statistical method.

This hassle, however, has started to fade recently with advances in social psychology and perhaps due to preferences for some paradigms to others. However, if in sociology the discussion has declined, social psychologists have elaborated various methods giving more tools to sociologists and social psychologists in the study of SRs, not only to identify them, but also structure them.

A Shift to Social Psychology

At first, Moscovici renamed the concept from collective to social representations because he thought Durkheimian views on representations were limited, i.e. social representations cannot be unified, since cultures are different, and finally because Durkheim's collective representations did not allow sociologists to study their objects as time evolves.

Thus, to shed more clarity on what kinds of representations he referred to, he argued there should be three conditions to take place to talk about representations. 1) The dispersion of information about the object of representation, which is generally insufficient and overabundant because of the complexity of the object or the social, cultural or educational barriers. Hence, there is a gap between the information needed to allow the knowledge of an object and the information we actually have. It is this difficulty of access to information that would favor the indirect transmission of knowledge and therefore, the appearance of many distortions [15]; 2) the focus of a group or an individual on certain aspects of the object of representation. This focus is a function of the interests and the implication of the individuals vis-à-vis the object. It would thus prevent them from having a global vision. 3) the pressure to the inference exerted by the group. Under the pressure of circumstances and social relations, it would be necessary to take a stand, to build a common and stable code, to obtain the recognition and the adhesion of others. Moscovici's explanations remained coherent with those of Durkheim. However, the most interesting developments of the theory, research methodology, came after with an extensive elaboration on the theory [12] [6] [10] [5] [7] [21].

As Abric pointed out, the complexity to study representations lies in the type of objects being studied, and the pieces of information, either insufficient or abundant, available to investigate an object [1]. In the same way, topics about education are extremely abundant, and one might assume that the nucleus of students' social representations have already been approached as such, which appears not to be the case as far as the current literature is concerned, which seems to be on opinions mainly, a remark also made by [25] [12].

The latter authors developed methods which can be used to study the structure and content of representations. However, in sociology less empirical and quantitative methods for this endeavor have emerged, if at all. The theory of representations lost its importance in sociology due to trends internal and external to sociology. The theory has become a cornerstone for social psychologists who have developed methods to study social representations empirically [18].

2. Social Representations outside Education

Social representations can be extremely ambiguous and found in almost all social sciences across various continents under various approaches and terming. In education, little clarification has been put on the term, although very often used to describe a plethora of aspects from within and outside education. For instance, in Asia, America, and Europe, the focus has been on language proficiency to commence studies, adaptation, perception and satisfaction linked to studies and cultural settings [14] [4] [28] [3] [24] [2]. These studies are numerous and simply the views of stakeholders in education without intent to look at the social factors which actually lead to the formation of those images/perception/symbolic aspects of foreign students. Although, studies conducted on social representations of higher education discuss elements of those representations, less are done to explain the reasons behind the formation of social representations. For example, the social representations of teachers/school staff by students [13] [19] [25], to name a few.

Therefore, I argue that the perception of crime of foreign students in Russia, for example, might influence their social representations of the Russian higher education, an argument also supported by Moliner who also argues that individuals can apprehend in terms of citizenship, economic, love or biological motives [16]. Additionally, I suggest that the formation of such representations follows two intertwined patterns. For instance, in the case of crime 1) will depend on the experience as a victim of crime, the educational background; gender(woman) and age of individuals [29], media exposure and punitivity. However, they are not static and may change, that is, the perception might be higher or slower and

vice versa depending on daily interactions rather than experiences with crime. 2) Experiences which in turn coupled with collective consciousness of other objects of societies might aggravate or attenuate the social representations(perception) of crime in Russia. Similarly, the social representations of higher education for the first proposition will depend mostly on the quality of teaching, adaptation of students (interactions with other foreign students via language and cultural assimilation), or ranking of the university, which are mainly discussed in higher education when it comes to social representations practically seen here as perception.

On the other hand, they will depend on social objects not related to education as mentioned above with crime, or mega events, acceptance or rejection in relationships(dating, friendships), or the architecture of the city and a feeling of belongingness, which I argue affect or connect to the social representations of higher education, and this process constantly evolves, a process also described as a driving force of the performance of a representation [22].

3. Methods for analyzing social representations

Lo Monaco discuss the methods available in the study of social representations, and argue that they can be classified under three sets [12], those which study: 1) the content, 2) the structure, 3) the nature of the core(nucleus) of social representations. Most of them are characterized by limitations, thus, to remedy to this lack of robustness, one needs to proceed with a triangulation technique, in other words mix them together, which beforehand requires the analysis of the core of the social representations. I introduce a few of them below, without giving ample explanations which are extremely well detailed by the authors mentioned in this section.

Verbal Association

To describe this method, let us imagine the following scenario. Suppose a group of foreign students at a 'university A' are the subjects of a research on representations with the object being their representations of the 'university A'. The researcher may for instance, 1) ask them which words come first when 'university A' comes across their mind. 2) Then, the respondents need to order their answers from the most to the least important, or by order of occurrence. The design of the questionnaire can be adapted depending on one's objectives in research [20] [23] [25].

For many authors, the argument here is, the most important answers qualify for the centrality of representations, more salient elements come first [25] [26], which can be measured by their frequency and average relevance while proceeding to the ordering (or not) of the elements of the core. However, because many factors can affect the order or frequency of those representations, it is not suitable to identify the structure of the representations of university A, only an idea of the content is given.

Additionally, if the group of students being investigated are numerous, to express the same idea, many words might be given, leading to some inaccuracy, as meanings vary among cultures, to stay coherent with Moscovici's terms, therefore, varying in their relevance. That implies what Lo Monaco et al. refer to as a thematic grouping at times. Another method more or less similar is the questionnaire of characterization [8] which can be used to reinforce the verbal association technique, which somehow is similar to Likert Scale.

The Attribute-Challenge Technique and Test of Context Independence

These methods are among the most suitable in the analysis of the structure of social representations and relying on the fact that the core elements of a representation have some symbolism attached to them, characterized by Moscovici, as indispensable and non-negotiable without which social representations lose their meaning [17]. Technically, "it is based on the double-negative principle and can identify whether the lack of a link between the representational element and the object of representation (first negation) is unacceptable (second negation) or acceptable (absence of second negation)" [12]. For example, the researcher looks for the link between elements and the object of the representations, if that link is absent and undesirable to the majority of respondents, thus, those elements are non-negotiable for the definition of the object and is, therefore, central. The methods can be resumed below in the figure on a case study of energy savings [12].

Characterization

Another method is the questionnaire of characterization [8]. The first aim of the questionnaire is to identify an existing hierarchy of themes characterizing elements with a strong salience and closer to the object studied, and a similar replication realized by Verges. It is made of a list

of elements whose number is a multiple of 3 or more depending on investigators and what they are studying. Then, the subjects choose the most characterizing elements of the object studied, with the answer coded as number 3. Then, they are asked to choose among the remaining items by selecting a specific number being the least characteristic of the studied object, and they are coded as number 1.

The remaining unchosen elements are coded as number 2. The restriction of choice as argued by Verges, lies on the equiprobability of a statistical model, in other words, the probability of the elements being coded 1, 2 or 3 is equal to 0.33. As a result, there might be three dominating aspects after gathering data. 1) If the distribution of elements shows a J-form, then those elements are central to the representations. 2) a U-form distribution means that the hierarchy of SRs is split into two opposing views, and finally 3) bell-distribution of a Gaussian type showing elements having no relationship with the object of SRs and helping identify the limitations of the meanings of the studied object. Finally, on the one hand to verify that the questionnaire was explanatory enough, results will have to be compared with the probability value of 0.33.

4. Conclusion

This paper aimed at presenting the concept of social representations in higher education from a different angle which has received less focus. Also, some methods that can be used to study those social representations. The main ones on which much attention was were the verbal association and the attribute challenge technique and the questionnaire of characterization. Not all of them were discussed as the use of them depends on researchers and the priority of the objects being socially represented, for instance, Basic Cognitive Schemes (BCS) and Similarity Analysis (SA) also techniques aiming at analyzing representations with the assumptions that cognitive elements are interconnected, therefore looking at the connexity existing between them. However, using them parallelly can provide useful insights, and indeed need to be tested and more developed within the field of higher education to provide more insights on the way foreign students represent higher education in general, and more specifically in Russia.

References

1. Abric Jean Claude. 1994. *Pratiques sociales et représentations*. Paris: PUF. URL: https://www.persee.fr/doc/forem_0759-6340_1994_num_47_1_2529_t1_0092_0000_5
2. Alemu Aye Mengistu, and Jason Cordier. 2017. “Factors Influencing International Student Satisfaction in Korean Universities.” *Journal of Educational Development* 57 (Nov): 54-64. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2017.08.006>
3. Andrade S M. 2006. “International students in English-speaking universities: Adjustment factors.” *Journal of Research in International Education* 5 (2): 131–154. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240906065589>
4. Antonova N., Abramova S., Grunt E., Merenkov A., and Dronishinets N. 2019. “Student’s Territorial Mobility (Example of Yekaterinburg).” Shenzhen: DEStech Publications, Inc. URL: <https://science.urfu.ru/en/publications/students-territorial-mobility-example-of-yekaterinburg>
5. Breakwell M.G. 1993. “Social representations and social identity.” *Papers on Social Representations* 2 (1): 198–217. URL: http://www.psr.jku.at/psr1993/2_1993brea2.pdf
6. Doise W. 2005. «Les représentations sociales.» In *Social psychology of cognition*, edited by Psychologie sociale de la cognition In N. Dubois (Ed.), 153–207. Paris: Dunod.
7. Doise W. A Clémence, and F. Lorenzi-Cioldi. 1993. *The quantitative analysis of social representations*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf. URL: https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/23996641?q&sort=holdings+desc&_id=1574880095845&versionId=29017448+44283646+218404784
8. Flament C. 1981. «L’analyse de similitude: une technique pour l’étude des représentations sociales.» *Cahiers de Psychologie Cognitive* 1 (1): 375–395. URL: <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1982-31615-001>
9. Höijer Birgitta. 2011. “Social Representations Theory: A New Theory for Media Research.” *Nordicom Review* 32 (2): 3-16. URL: <https://www.nordicom.gu.se/en/tidskrifter/nordicom-review-22011/social-representations-theory-new-theory-media-research>
10. Jodelet D. 1989. *Représentations sociales: un domaine en expansion*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

11. Lahlou Saadi. 2001. “Functional aspects of social representations.” In *Representations of the social: bridging theoretical traditions*, edited by Kay Deaux, 131–146. Oxford: Blackwell.
12. Lo Monaco, Grégory, Anthony Piermattéo , Patrick Rateau, and Jean Louis Tavani. 2016. “Methods for Studying the Structure of Social Representations: A Critical Review and Agenda for Future Research.” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 47 (3): 306-331. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12124>
13. Lopes da Silva, Ariane. 2012. “social representations of undergraduates about teacher identity and work a gender perspective.” *Educação, Sociedade & Culturas* 36: 49-64. URL: https://www.fpce.up.pt/ciie/revistaesc/ESC36/ESC36_Ariane.pdf
14. Merenkov A., and Antonova N. 2015. “Problems of social adaptation of international students in Russia.” *New Educational Review* 41 (3): 122-132. URL: <https://doi.org/10.15804/ner.2015.41.3.10>
15. Moliner P. 1993. «Cinq questions à propos des représentations.» *Les cahiers internationaux de psychologie sociale* 20 (1): 5-13.
16. Moliner P. 2001. «Formation et stabilisation des représentations sociales.» In *La dynamique des représentations sociales*, edited by Moliner, 15-41. Grenoble: PUG.
17. Moscovici Serge. 1993. “Introductory Address.” *Papers on Social Representations* 2: 1–11.
18. Palmonari A., and Emiliani F. 2009. *Paradigmi delle rappresentazioni sociali*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
19. Pardal Louis, Diana Albuquerque, Madalena Lopes, and Maria Eugenia Ferra0. 2013. «Statistical Evidence on Social Representations of Teachers in Argentina, Brazil and Portugal.» *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 82 (2013): 734–739. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.06.339>
20. Pianelli Carine , Jean-Claude Abric, and Farida Saad. 2010. «Rôle Des Représentations Sociales Préexistantes Dans Les Processus D’ancrage Et De Structuration D’une Nouvelle Représentation.» *Les Cahiers Internationaux de Psychologie Sociale* 86 (February): 241-274.
21. Rateau P., Moliner P., Guimelli C., and J-C Abric. 2011. “SocialRepresentation Theory.” In *Handbook of theories of social psychology*, edit-

- ed by A.W. Kruglanski, & E.T. Higgins P. A. M. Van Lange, 477–487. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
22. Rouquette Marie-Louis. 1994. *Sur la connaissance des masses*. Grenoble: PUG.
23. Souchet L., and Girandola F. 2013. “Double foot-in-the-door, social representations, and environment: application for energy savings.” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 43 (2): 306–315. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2012.01000.x>
24. Stromquist P.N., and Monkman K. 2014. *Globalization and education: Integration and contestation across cultures*. 2. Plymouth: R&L Education.
25. Vale, Silvia Fernandes do, and Helois Regina Maciel. 2019. “The Structure of Students’ Parents’ Social Representations of Teachers.” *Trends in Psychology* 27: 265–278.
26. Vergès Pierre. 2001. «L’analyse des représentations sociales par questionnaires.» *Revue française de sociologie* 42 (3): 537-561. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3323032>
27. Vergès P. 1994. «Approche dunoyau central: Propriétés quantitatives et structurales.» In *Structures and transformations of social representations*, edited by C. Guimelli, 233–253. Paris: Delachaux et Niestlé.
28. Vishnevsky R.Yu, and Narkhov Yu.D. 2019. “Paradoxes of the higher education modernization: Results of the 20year monitoring in the Sverdlovsk Region.” *RUDN Journal of Sociology* 19 (2): 289-301. URL: <http://journals.rudn.ru/sociology/article/view/21101>
29. Windzio M., Simonson J., Pfeiffer C., and Kleimann M. 2007. *Kriminalitätswahrnehmung und Punitivität in der Bevölkerung – Welche Rolle spielen die Massenmedien? Ergebnisse der Befragungen zu Kriminalitätswahrnehmung und Strafeinstellungen 2004 und 2006*. Hannover: KFN.

DATA ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fabrice S.N. Fosso

Ural Federal University

51, Lenin Ave., Ekaterinburg, Sverdlovsk region, 620075, Russian Federation

fabricefosso@outlook.com