

# **The Cambridge Handbook of Social Representations**

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# 15 Positioning theory and social representations

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On initial assessment it seems that the theory of social representations is 'neutral' with respect to the moral status of the content of representations. Social representations just are. If that were so the study of social representations would be outside the scope of positioning theory analysis. However, it would be a natural extension for a meta-social representation level to identify positions such as rights and duties, relevant forms of 'good' or 'bad', or 'better' or 'worse' social representations. For example, the social representation of Jews as subhuman conspirators inspired grotesquely evil conceptions of people's civic rights and duties. We must recognize that the theory of social representations does engage in positioning in important ways. The focus in social representations research is on collective representations, in the special sense that every person in a collective has more or less the same representation apropos of some matter, trivial or important. This contrasts with the focus on the individual in traditional psychology, leaving open the question of how it is possible for people to act as a group or faction or party. Second, this focus on the collective is associated with the highlighting of the collaborative processes through which shared representations arise.<sup>1</sup> 'Collaborative' does not mean that all the parties involved in the process of meaning construction have equal power. The study of social representations and their role in shaping forms of life necessarily involves attention to power disparities. Along with that must go attention and the issue of motives embedded in a socio-political system. Once this complexity is attended to, the various distributions of rights and duties to act within the collective become important. Who has the right to lead the crowd (*le fol*) and how has that right been established? According to positioning theory, the underlying motive for the prevalence of a shared representation is not to be found in individual minds, but in the characteristics of a socio-political order and the means through which this order is perpetuated. A current case of interest is the seemingly irrational stubbornness with which members of the National Rifle Association in the United States hang on to their interpretation of the 'right to bear arms'.

The work of Denise Jodelet (1989a) revealed the way in which representations of mental illness in rural areas of France profoundly affected the way rights and duties

<sup>1</sup> In social psychology we should, though we have not always done so, distinguish between a group as an aggregate where the group exists only by virtue of similarities between the members, and a group as a collective, in which there are real relations between members, for example engaging in a conversation, or even passing on rhino viruses to one another.

were assigned to the people relocated from asylums to farming families. Similarly, Claudine Herzlich (1973) showed how rural and urban social representations of 'being ill' affected the way people self-assigned the right to play the sick role, and how the recognition of that role differed from town to country.

The issue of positioning is deeply embedded in the whole programme of social representations research. Once some body of knowledge has been identified and its content established, that is, a social representation of some matter has been made explicit, the question of how it is to be realized arises – and that requires attention to the way rights and duties are distributed among the people who share the representation. Bringing the pattern of rights and duties to light must be an integral part of the research efforts inspired by the hypothesis that a social representation is shaping the content and form of what people are doing.

## The role of language

To appreciate the significance of positioning analyses in any field of psychology one must first reflect on some main features of the relations between language and thought and language and action. Thinking has many forms, but the form that is of paramount importance for most people is thinking as the use of cognitive tools to carry out the tasks of everyday life. The most important cognitive tools are symbols, usually words and other language-like devices such as timetables, and models, maps and other forms of iconic representation. Only recently has it been realized by psychologists that thinking can be communal as well as individual, public as well as private. And this immediately raises questions of morality. Are the uses of these devices freely open to all the competent members of a social group?

The domain of thinking is both intrapersonal and interpersonal. Thinking is not only an individual–personal activity but also a social–public one (Harré and Sammut, 2013). For example, the process of remembering includes conversational as well as introspective activities. Members of a family group or a committee or the golf club reminisce, a terrorist cell make plans, a loving couple discuss the future, each member contributing something to the construction of a version of the past from which that future will spring. Versions of both past and future are communally constructed, and each member takes away with them some personal version of that communal version on which further action is often based. It follows that there are exograms, records of the past outside the brain of a person, as well as engrams, traces of the past incorporated in long-term memory. There are legible material things, such as diaries, photos and monuments. There are the relevant records of the sayings and doings of other people. These are all resources for acts of remembering, often overriding personal recollections. They play their part in thinking about the future.

There are plenty of examples of thinking spanning both the individual–personal and social–public domains. In deciding what to do, a person will spend time on

private reflections of the consequences of a plan of action, perhaps attempting to imagine the future in some concrete way. However, often there are public discussions; people go about seeking advice on the best course of action. There are influences from the unstated opinions of others which may show up indirectly in what they do and say. There are informal varieties of the formal decision procedures involving agendas, resolutions, amendments, votes and so on. In all of these activities people draw on shared bodies of knowledge, that is, on social representations.

Clearly interpersonal relations must enter into communal forms of remembering, deciding, problem solving and so on. Among the most important are rights and duties and their distribution among the people involved. What makes such communal assignment of tasks possible? There must be shared bodies of knowledge and opinion, that is, another level of social representations, of the moral orders prevalent in a society.

### Vygotsky's principle

According to Vygotsky, all higher order mental processes exist twice; once in the relevant group, influenced by culture and history, and then in the mind of the individual. The development of a human being is dependent as much on interpersonal relations as it is on individual maturation. Here is the famous passage from Vygotsky (1978, p. 57):

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals.

The appropriation of public-social practices as personal-individual skills comes about by a kind of psychological symbiosis. When an activity is in the Zone of Proximal Development (in Vygotsky's rather clumsy phrase), the less skilled member of a dyad tries to accomplish some task (which may involve the meta-task of recognizing the task required in the first place – and who has the duty or the right to that?). If the junior member is unable to carry through the performance correctly and completely, the senior or more skilled member supplements the efforts of the less competent in such a way as to bring the task to a successful conclusion. The junior member copies the contributions of the senior next time the opportunity arises. Thus individual-personal skills are transferred in social-public performances.

Sometimes the contribution of the more skilled member of a group is hands-on showing and guiding, sometimes it is accomplished by words and other signs. Whatever device is employed, one thing is of paramount importance in the unfolding of such an episode: the distribution and acknowledgement of rights and duties

among the members. In both communal thought processes and in Vygotskian development the distribution of power in the group is closely tied in with the assignments and appropriations of rights and duties. Here is the core process for the formation of social representations. When the process of appropriation by the junior member of some of the skills and some of the knowledge of the senior member is complete, both junior and senior member *share* a bite-sized bit of the body of knowledge that will finally encompass the culture at large.

### Temporality

Not only do the tools of thought and action change with time, but so too do the distributions of rights and duties among a group of people. The individuals involved in communal cognitive activities are the bearers of a complex and labile psychology, some of which can be captured in a discussion of 'selves'. Though the English word *self* does not translate easily into most other languages, for instance into Spanish, nevertheless the concept can be appropriated as a term of art for scientific purposes. We must take account of how the mutability and multiplicity of self tie in with the local repertoire of rights and duties that shape the thought and action of the actors.

Persons are also selves. There seem to be four main items or aspects of personhood that the word is currently used to pick out. There is the *embodied self*, which comes down to the unity and continuity of a person's point of view and of action in the material world, a trajectory in space and time. The embodied self is singular, continuous and self-identical. Then there is the *autobiographical self*, the hero or heroine of all kinds of stories that one tells oneself and, suitably edited, tells to others. Research has shown how widely the autobiographical selves of real people can differ from story to story. Then there is the *social self* or selves, the personal qualities that a person displays in their encounters with others. This 'self' too is multiple. Psychologists use the phrase 'self-concept' to refer to the beliefs that people have about themselves, their skills, their moral qualities, their fears and their life courses. What sort of stories is it proper to tell? What do we have the duty or the right to tell? And what sort of personas are we able to display, within the constraints of a local moral order? Finally, there is the self as an ever-changing cluster of knowledge and skill, within which we find the content of social representations.

What can change? Clearly the embodied self is invariant under the kind of transformations that occur in everyday life. Changing jobs or partners, the birth and death of family members, even moving into a new linguistic community, does not disrupt the continuity of the trajectory of embodied life through space and time. Nevertheless, when memories fade and anticipation of the future dims, the continuity of the self often fades with it. Though a living human body is before us sometimes we are forced to acknowledge it is no longer an embodied self. However, the repertoire of social selves and the stories with which one marshals one's life

may and do change, and sometimes in radical ways. Knowledge, belief and skill are also changing.

Persons have rights and duties which are distributed in a variety of ways, depending on many factors, some of which involve the selves comprising the personhood of an individual. Here we encounter the central point of 'positioning theory'. If beliefs about the way rights and duties are taken up and laid down, ascribed and appropriated, refused and defended in the fine grain of the encounters of daily lives are salient to how people live their lives, then the study of the social representation of local moral orders is an indispensable research tool. A key question for psychologists is what each of us knows about the rights and duties inherent in a situation, and what the rights and duties of others might be. Here we encounter social representations of local forms of social order at the heart of positioning practices.

### The language angle

Language is the prime instrument of thought and social action. In following up the line of argument of the discussion so far, we must abandon a widely held presupposition of much psychological research, namely the stability and transpersonal intelligibility of language. In so far as there are psychologically significant varieties of language, so there are other dimensions of multiplicity of selves and the bodies of knowledge to which they have access, either individually or socially. In so far as such bodies of knowledge are shared, that is have some degree of common content, they are social representations.

### Cultural variety

Since there are many languages, the *senses of self* as unique, independent individuals are likely to vary from culture to culture. For example, there are differences in patterns of self-reflection between users of languages in which pronouns index individuals independently of their social affiliations, and those in which pronouns index the group or category to which a person belongs. Feminists have drawn attention to the role played by the preference for the third person masculine singular in English in inclining the culture towards marginalizing women. In Japanese there are many first person pronominal expressions, the use of which displays the speaker's and the hearer's sense of relative social position. *Watakushi* is used to display higher status than is displayed in the use of *watushi*. There is even a form, *ore*, which can be used for self-reference but which exempts the speaker from the moral commitments of what he might say. (*He* is needed in this account since pronoun use differs between men and women.) Modern urban Japanese speakers largely omit pronouns, reflecting differences in the modern Japanese sense of self from the socially dominated sense of personhood of the past.

### Context

Languages are unstable, in the sense that the *significance of utterances* is likely to vary from time to time and situation to situation. For example, there are subtle changes of the word *captain* from its use in ships, teams and planes. Technically, context includes indexicality, the contribution to the meaning of an expression from knowledge of the place, time and person of utterance. For example, the word *here* indexes the content of an utterance with the place of the speaker. This is one of the functions of the first person singular. Then there is historicity, the way a word's current use is loaded with its past history. No one can use the words 'twin towers' now in the kind of generic descriptive way it was used before 9/11. For the purposes of this discussion, the way that social relations partly determine the *moment by moment significance* of utterances will be of paramount importance. For example, take such a simple utterance as 'I am going out; I might be some time.' Think of the way being married sets up social relations between a man and a woman and so informs the significance of utterances such as 'I am going out; I might be some time.' And then think of these words as uttered by Captain Oates on Scott's ill-fated Antarctic expedition.

### Positioning theory

Positioning Theory, as we have briefly introduced the approach, is the study of the nature, formation, influence and ways of change of local systems of rights and duties as shared assumptions about them influence small scale interactions. Such shared assumptions are of course social representations of the moral orders in which the actors live. Positioning theory is to be seen in contrast to the older framework of Role Theory. Roles are relatively fixed, often formally defined and long-lasting. Even such phenomena as 'role distance' and 'role strain' presuppose the stability of the roles to which they are related. Positioning theory concerns conventions of speech and action that are labile, contestable and ephemeral.

### Conditions of meaningfulness

There are three relevant background conditions for the meaningfulness of a flow of symbolic interactions. The media of such interactions include linguistic performances, but also other symbolic systems. People make use of religious icons, road signs, gestures and so on, in the maintenance of the flow of actions constitutive of a social episode.

First, the revealing of the local repertoire of *admissible social acts and meanings*, in particular the illocutionary force of what is said and done, is a necessary beginning to any psychological research. Illocutionary force is the effective, then and there social significance of what is said or done (Austin, 1961). The same

verbal formula, gesture, flag or whatever, may have a variety of meanings depending on who is using it, where and for what. Uttering 'I'm sorry', may, in certain circumstances, be the performance of an apology. It may also, in the UK, be a way of asking someone to repeat what has just been said. It may be a way of expressing incredulity. There are no doubt other uses for the phrase. Here we have a distinct repertoire of social representations of illocutionary force.

But secondly, we must always ask: Who has the right or the duty to use these words in these ways? Does the contemporary leader of a nation have the duty, or even the right to apologize to the descendants of once persecuted citizens for what was done by a different citizenry of the past with different social representations of humanity? This question can be addressed by reference to the implicit pattern of the *distribution of rights and duties* to make use of items from the local repertoires of the illocutionary forces of various signs and utterances. Each distribution is a position. A mother has the right to discipline her child in whatever way law and custom allow, but a visiting neighbour does not. 'Nice little girls say "Thank you"' is only available, properly, to the parent. Catholics have a duty to confess their sins individually, while Protestants do not. Positions have this in common with roles, that they pre-exist the people who occupy them, as part of the common knowledge of a community, family, sports team and so on. These examples introduce a deeper feature of social representations – the way that a body of knowledge exists in a community rather than in any individual psyche. How does the existence of a public record of a body of knowledge affect its modes and domains of application? For example, the relevant may be recorded in a book which is consulted from time to time to manage local social events, and then put away and forgotten until the next time such a ceremony is required. This observation opens up a facet of life that ought to be of interest to those using the idea of social representations to develop their research programs.

Thirdly, every episode of human interaction is shaped by one or more *story lines* which are usually taken for granted by those taking part in the episode. The study of origins and plots of the story-lines of a culture is the work of narratology. There are strong connections, too, to autobiographical psychology (the study of how, why and when people 'tell their lives' and to whom). A train journey may be told as a 'heroic quest', and what would have been complaints about lateness according to one story-line become obstacles to be bravely overcome. A solicitous remark can be construed as caring according to one story-line, but as an act of condescension according to another (Davies and Harré, 1990).

### The positioning 'triangle'

The three background conditions mutually determine one another. Presumptions about rights and duties are involved in fixing the moment-by-moment meanings of speaking and acting, while both are influenced by and influence the taken-for-granted story-lines that are unfolding in an episode. Challenges to the propriety, effectiveness and morality of the way a strip of life is emerging can be directed to

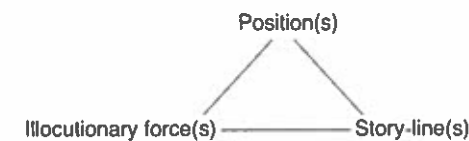


Figure 15.1 The positioning triangle.

any one of the three aspects. We can represent this mutuality schematically (see Figure 15.1).

Each such triangle is accompanied by shadowy alternatives, into which it can modulate or which can sometimes exist as competing and simultaneous readings of events.

There is a possible fourth vertex, the physical positions and stances of the actors, for example doctor standing, patient lying; Hitler and Mussolini in Chapman's film in which each tries to elevate his barber's chair above the other; studies of layout of furniture in offices. These gambits are also framed by positioning.

### Positioning analysis

Some examples will illustrate the value of using positioning theory to analyze the underlying structure of presuppositions that influence the unfolding of an episode. The research examples we provide demonstrate how positioning analysis has been extended from interpersonal positioning to the levels of intrapersonal and intergroup positioning.

The traditional approach of examining interpersonal positioning, with a focus on how language can influence conflict, is well represented by studies in Moghadam and Harré (2010). In some cases the main tactic for preventing conflict is for the parties involved to keep talking, because as long as the talk continues there will not be military conflict. Just this kind of situation was examined by Moghadam, Hanley and Harré (2003) in their analysis of discussions between Dr Henry Kissinger (Assistant to the United States President for National Security Affairs, and later Secretary of State) and the leaders of China (Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Communist Party of the People's Republic of China) and Russia (Leonid I. Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union). These conversations took place between 1971 and 1976 in the context of the Cold War. Despite the intense rivalry between his country and China and Russia, and despite the ongoing war in Vietnam, Kissinger presented himself as an 'honest friend', having 'frank' conversations with 'chums', and separately Mao and Brezhnev supported this positioning and the dialogue was continued, avoiding an escalation of local military conflicts into global wars.

Positioning analysis has also been extended to the intrapersonal level of private discourse, when a person intentionally or unintentionally positions the self

in stories told to the self. For example, Harré and Moghaddam (2008) explored how a person can struggle with her/his own conscience, and with self-imposed duties that in some cases are only known to oneself. Tan and Moghaddam (1995) examined intrapersonal ('reflexive') positioning across cultures, and pointed out cross-cultural similarities and differences. For example, consider how cultural differences in religious beliefs can result in people saying to themselves 'You have to work harder. If you fail, you only have yourself to blame' in one context, and 'You have to pray harder, if you fail it means God did not accept your prayers' in another context. Tan and Moghaddam (1995) also found similarities across cultures, focussing on how both Islamic Sufis and American transcendentalists attempted to arrive at an authentic 'true' self by stripping away all that is not essential and 'real' about the self.

In some cases the positioning of oneself within the self is intended to prepare the self for presentation to others, with exhortations such as 'Come on, you can do it' taking place privately to motivate the self for a particular type of self-presentation, such as a student project presented in front of a class. In other cases, the positioning of oneself is intended solely for review by the self, such as when a person keeps a private diary intended to be read only by oneself. Diaries, 'notes to oneself' and reminders used to help us remember things are all examples of conversations with the self (see examples in Harré and Moghaddam, 2012).

Another way in which this research has been extended is through the application of positioning analysis to better understand intergroup relations. A study of this kind involved rivalries over intellectual patent rights between native people in South America and a scientist and his group of western backers (Moghaddam and Ginsberg, 2003). This unlikely intergroup rivalry arose because a young western scientist came back to the United States from his travels in Ecuador with the claim that he had discovered a 'new variety of plant' with beneficial healing powers. He applied and received a patent for this discovery from the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO). However, the news of this patent resulted in fierce opposition from a number of groups of native peoples in South America, and the international media helped spread an alternative story-line: the *Ayahuasca*, a plant known and used by various South American groups for at least hundreds of years had been stolen by westerners, who were now attempting (through the US patent) to force indigenous people to pay for the use of their 'own' plant. The outcome of this intergroup competition was the revocation of the US patent – the natives won this fight at least. In essence, their right to use the plant in their traditional ways was judged to trump the right of western scientists to patent the plant for drug development and research.

### Conclusion

The advent of positioning theory as a development of Vygotsky's conception of the person in an ocean of language, in intimate interaction with others in the

construction of a flow of public and social cognition, opens up all sorts of insights and research opportunities, making the interpretation of the idea of 'social representations' as public knowledge corpora meaningful. Moving beyond the overly restrictive frame of role theory, it offers a conceptual system within which to follow the unfolding of episodes of everyday life the orderliness of which ought to be a matter for astonishment and so food for explanation. Here the joint use of positioning theory and social representations is a powerful tool.