



Social Representations

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INTRODUCTION

Since its inception and elaboration by Moscovici (1961, 1963) over fifty years ago, the theory of social representations has become an important framework for researchers all over the world. 'Social Representations' is neither a label for a methodological approach nor for a particular method. The term 'Social Representations' denominates a research perspective, which originates broadly (although not exclusively) from social psychology, but has also been adopted in other areas of research, including health psychology, education and developmental psychology. The first study that both defined and described social representations (Moscovici, 2008¹) focused on understandings of psychoanalysis, and was a quantitative content analysis of the press combined with a representative survey. From the outset, then, social representations theory has also incorporated a more experimental tradition of methods (see Flick et al., 2015, for more discussion). However, very early, a qualitative tradition of social representations research also developed with Herzlich's (1968/1973) study of representations of health, based on interviews with a small but focused sample. Consequently, the research perspective of social representations is not

necessarily linked to qualitative research, and to assume this would be as much of a mistake as to see it as a method in and of itself. However for many issues studied from this perspective, qualitative research is more appropriate than other approaches. Simultaneously, the theory of social representations can be a fruitful framework for conceptualizing and doing qualitative research in psychology.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its broad and deliberately ambitious theoretical scope, social representations theory is not a methodologically prescriptive theory. Although this is intentional, the theory's methodological polytheism was an early source of criticism (Jahoda, 1988). Although some early attempts were made to operationalise the theory and give advice on how to 'do' social representations research (see Breakwell and Canter, 1993), Bauer and Gaskell (1999) rightly point out that, at the point at which they were writing, there was little guidance for any researcher on the implications of the theory for empirical research. The situation has now changed (see Bauer and Gaskell, 2008; Flick, 2001; Wagner and Hayes, 2005; Flick et al., 2015), but this does not mean that there is a consensus on the 'right' way to research social representations, nor indeed agreement over whether such a thing would be

desirable in the first place. Many researchers continue to employ the theory in more quantitative studies; Moscovici (1988) and Wagner and Hayes (2005) cite several examples of experimental studies using the theory. However, it is our contention that there is an important reciprocal relationship between qualitative research and social representations theory, in that both have a lot to gain from one another.

In this chapter we will firstly highlight some of the main points of the theory, and its historical context, in relation to qualitative research. We will then move on to consider the methodological implications of the theory, focusing in particular on some of the benefits afforded by the theory from a methodological point of view, and providing some examples from our own work and that of other researchers in the area. Finally, we will consider some of the challenges for the qualitative researcher using social representations theory that are still to be addressed, and draw some tentative conclusions for the future.

the last 50 years (e.g. Moscovici, 1973, 1984a, 1988; Farr, 1987; Jovchelovitch, 1996; Marková, 1996; Duveen, 2000; Sammut et al., 2015). However, it is important here to consider certain key features of the theory that make it of particular relevance to researchers using qualitative methods. In particular, we will focus on issues of meaning and social context in theory and research.

Meaning and interpretation are often said to lie at the heart of qualitative research (Bauer et al., 2000; Flick, 2014). They are also concepts that are central to social representations theory: the theory maintains that common sense or lay understandings are all too often denigrated and seen as inferior to other forms of knowledge, such as scientific or expert knowledge (Foster, 2003b). Instead of seeking to place common-sense understanding in a hierarchy of knowledge, social representations theory takes as its starting point the notion that common-sense knowledge provides social groups with ways of understanding the world around them, and of communicating about it (Moscovici, 1973). Through the twin cognitive processes of anchoring and objectification (Moscovici, 1984a), individuals within a social group can make sense of unfamiliar concepts, by associating them with existing ideas and images.