

# THEORY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE DISCOURSE OF THE COLLECTIVE SUBJECT

*Teoria das representações sociais: referencial teórico do discurso do sujeito coletivo*

*Teoría de las representaciones sociales: marco teórico del discurso del sujeto colectivo*

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The Theory of Social Representations was initially presented by Serge Moscovici, a Romanian social psychologist who became a naturalized French citizen, in his 1961 work “Psychoanalysis, its image and its public”. In this book, the author analyzes the perception of the French population regarding Freud's psychoanalysis in the 1950s. Even though the initial impact that the work had on intellectuals of that time, the theory itself did not arouse special interest; this would only happen in later decades, with the advancement of research on the subject<sup>1</sup>.

Based on the works of the sociologist and anthropologist Émile Durkheim, Moscovici raises an important critique of individual nature within the context of collective representations. Durkheim distinguishes individual representations as belonging to the domain of psychology and collective representations as belonging to the domain of sociology<sup>2</sup>.

Therefore, collective representations constitute a social fact, and consequently result in a collective consciousness, and can not be treated from an individual perspective. Moscovici, however, argues that social representation must be understood in a broader way, considering the individual psychological context, but also social and cultural influence<sup>3</sup>.

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Morera<sup>4</sup> states that the “notion of Social Representation lies in the proportional relationship between the psychological and the social.” According to the author, it is related to how subjects apprehend common sense knowledge, which, in turn, is constituted from the individual experiences of other social subjects. Then, it is knowledge shared within a specified society. Morera<sup>4</sup> concludes:

In other words, representation functions as a system for interpreting reality, which guides individuals' relationships with their physical and social environment, as it determines their behaviors, conduct, and practices.<sup>4</sup>

Other authors corroborate what Morera<sup>4</sup> stated. Nogueira<sup>1</sup>, for example, states that:

Social Representation Theory is a theoretical model that aims to understand and explain the construction of knowledge established by the group, the lay theory, which arises from common sense<sup>1</sup>.

The author also highlights the importance of not attributing all common-sense knowledge to social representations, reinforcing that the subject matter must be culturally relevant to the group being studied. This implies that the same social representation does not apply to different social groups, especially regarding social and economic status.<sup>1</sup>

Minayo<sup>5</sup>, Oliveira et al.<sup>6</sup>, Rocha<sup>7</sup>, among other authors, agree in reinforcing that social representations are reflections of societies and carry within them their relationships with daily life, the knowledge produced by the group to which they belong, and are also expressions of “the specific interests and dynamism of social groups and classes”<sup>5</sup>. Some representations are more comprehensive, reflecting the entire worldview of a society at a given time, commonly, these are the conceptions of the dominant classes<sup>8</sup>.

Rocha<sup>7</sup> states that the main objective is not to identify past representations, but those of current society, considering the knowledge produced in the present. He further emphasizes that this is “relative to who is speaking and from where they are speaking [...] highlighting the importance of the group to which one belongs”<sup>7</sup>.

Therefore, it is important to emphasize that social representations are constructed and traversed by the language of the society being heard, with speech being its main instrument. Minayo<sup>8</sup> states that social representations manifest themselves in various ways, but that language is their privileged mediation. Rocha<sup>7</sup> corroborates the author by referring to language as the instrument used by subjects to attribute meaning to their realities.

Due to all the characteristics already mentioned, Jodelet<sup>9</sup> describes social representations as “complex phenomena that are always active and acting in social life.” The author recognizes social representations as systems of interpretation that govern the subject-world-society relationship, based on social communication. The phenomena of diffusion and assimilation of knowledge and personal and social identifications have a relevant impact on issues of social belonging in groups, with affective implications and the potential to generate major social transformations<sup>9</sup>.

The concept of Social Representations is extremely relevant to qualitative research, especially in its practical application, from conducting interviews to practice observation<sup>5</sup>. Its use as a theoretical framework, especially in the health area, “has contributed to the understanding and structuring of behaviors and actions in response to certain facts related to the health-disease process”<sup>6</sup>.

Due to their dynamic and changeable nature, depending on the society or group being heard, the historical period, and the topic being studied, social representations do not employ a single method, but many<sup>7</sup>. Since language is the primary source of information, meeting and listening to the subjects is an essential part of these methods.

It is a framework that seeks to build scientific knowledge by using research in a broad sense, that is, exploring the object of study and correlating it with existing paradigms recognized by the scientific community<sup>7</sup>. Sousa and Souza<sup>10</sup> corroborate the author, highlighting that social representations “present the opportunity to understand the articulation between scientific knowledge and common-sense knowledge that social groups establish”.

The authors also emphasize that the use of social representation theory allows for the investigation of specific situations, such as the process of concept creation, which could guide targeted interventions<sup>10</sup>.

Among the many methods that use the Theory of Social Representations as a theoretical framework, in this essay, we will focus on the Discourse of the Collective Subject.

Oliveira et al.<sup>6</sup> highlight that:

*The Theory of Social Representations has been a relevant theoretical framework in the health research area, and the use of the Collective Subject Discourse presents itself as a systematic method for the treatment and analysis of data in research grounded in Social Representation. The use of this theoretical-methodological resource favors the construction of discourses that represent individuals, in addition to allowing greater reliability and objectivity in qualitative research<sup>6</sup>.*

The Collective Subject Discourse (CSD) was developed starting in the 1990s by the couple Fernando and Ana Maria Lefevre, professors at the Faculty of Public Health of the University of São Paulo. The authors describe the CSD as a method of recovering Social Representations, described by Moscovici and discussed previously<sup>11</sup>. From this perspective, according to Costa Marinho<sup>12</sup>, the CSD is used to understand and describe these representations, making it possible to promote and restructure actions and public policies on the researched topic.

Several authors refer to CSD as a technique for tabulating qualitative data<sup>13-14</sup>. The Lefevre couple themselves refer to their theory as a technique for processing testimonies, dedicated to gathering testimonial content with approximate meaning and organizing such content into semantic categories according to the meaning expressed<sup>15-16</sup>.

The distinctive feature of the method, however, lies in the fact that from each category, with its individual but similar contents, a single discourse is produced, in the first-person singular, producing an effect of “collectivists speaking”<sup>16</sup>. That is, the construction of this discourse, from various individual discourses, seeks to reconstruct the social representations of a group while maintaining its individual dimension, but articulating it with the collective dimension<sup>11,15</sup>.

According to Oliveira Júnior, Pacagnan and Marchiori<sup>17</sup>, CSD “is concerned with creating a bridge between common sense and scientific knowledge, starting from the reconstruction of collective thought”. Genaro et al.<sup>14</sup>, Oliveira et al.<sup>6</sup> and Duarte, Mamede, Andrade<sup>18</sup> corroborate this idea by stating that the technique aims to unveil how people think, attribute meaning and position themselves on a specific topic through the construction of collective thought. “It is a sharing of ideas in a given social group”<sup>18</sup>.

In this sense, it is important to highlight that what is described in the final discourse is not a creation of the researcher, but a reconstruction of a reality perceived by the studied group, a social fact. Individual expressions undergo an analytical scrutiny by the researcher, which includes specific operations of abstraction and conceptualization, thus being considered scientifically processed products. What is interpreted from the discourse is what can be considered the sole responsibility of the researcher<sup>11</sup>.

Still considering its scientific aspect, it is important to comment on what Lefevre<sup>16</sup> refers to as “the issue of sampling”. He emphasizes that, when dealing with empirical opinion research, sampling should be related to both the quantity and quality of the information collected, which requires the careful selection of the subjects to be approached<sup>16</sup>.

The qualitative scope of the method, therefore, is easily established and is directly related to the collected discourses, considering what they can reveal, their subjective depth, the social dimension, and their capacity to answer the questions proposed by the research<sup>19</sup>. Figueiredo, Chiani, and Goulart<sup>13</sup> point out that these discourses generate a panel of social representations and try to find to “Based on a series of methodological artifice, to recover collective thought in a less arbitrary way than usually occurs in qualitative research.”

Through this methodological artifice it is possible to quantify the frequency with which each semantic category appears among individuals, considering the relative significance and expressed as a percentage. In other words, the research does not require a large pool of participants, but only enough for the explanatory potential of each category is convincing to explain the phenomenon<sup>13,14,18</sup>.

For this, it is also essential to consider the diversity of the chosen group, reiterating what has already been pointed out regarding the importance of sample selection. The number of people should be proportional to the phenomenon being studied and consider parity in other sociodemographic categories that may have an impact (gender, education, income, etc.).

Considering all of the above, Costa Marinho<sup>12</sup> reinforces that the qualitative and quantitative aspect of CSD is an important indicator in the panorama of social representation research and justifies:

*Previously, only qualitative methods were used, and therefore considered unsatisfactory due to the impossibility of generalizing results, although supposedly more in-depth. In turn, quantitative research, whose main characteristic is to generate the quantities and statistical distributions of opinions in a given collectivity, did not achieve the desirable aspects in research of this nature. In the CSD's quali-quantitative proposal, it is possible to study both dimensions in opinion polls<sup>12</sup>.*

In his work “Discourse of the Collective Subject: Our ways of thinking, our collective self”<sup>16</sup>. Fernando Lefevre describes five stages in the processing of collective discourse analysis (CSD): obtaining testimonies, discourse reduction, search for meaning(s), categorization, and collective subject discourses. We will briefly present all phases, articulated with the present research.

Regarding obtaining testimonies, the author emphasizes that the essential element for a successful CSD is that the testimonies be “rich, spontaneous and truthful”<sup>16</sup>, and stipulates some rules for formulating questions so that this occurs. Among them, we will only mention that the questions should be broad, without containing leading answers, but should clearly focus a single objective<sup>16</sup>.

The collection of testimonies can be individual or in groups, according to the characteristics of each project. The most widespread form of use of this method is through open or semi-structured individual interviews. This approach provides an environment free from interference, allowing the interviewee to express their opinions safely. Furthermore, it allows the interviewer to guide the interview, encouraging spontaneous discourse.

The next step, which the author calls discourse reduction, is where the specificities of the methodology emerge, through methodological figures. The first one we highlight are the Key Expressions (KE), which are the most significant parts of each question<sup>16,20</sup>. Genaro et al.<sup>14</sup> emphasize that these excerpts should represent significant units of discourse and provide the authentic view of the research participant.

During the stage of searching for meaning(s), the methodological figure of Central Ideas (CI) emerges, which are synthetic formulations by the researcher that describe the meanings of the content highlighted in the previous phase. At this point, the researcher creates a “semantic label,” possibly using words that are not found in the collected testimonies.

Lefevre<sup>16</sup> highlights that: “CI differs from KE, because it concerns the meaning(s) of the testimony while KE concerns its content.” Therefore, it plays a crucial role in synthesizing the testimonies; CI will guide the construction of the CSD later<sup>14</sup>.

In addition to CI, this stage includes Anchorages (AC), which may or may not appear in the discourses. They describe “not the meaning, but the ideologies, values, and beliefs present in the verbal material of the individual or grouped responses”<sup>20</sup>.

The categorization stage consists of grouping similar CI or AC, with an identifying mark that can distinguish the highlighted topics<sup>20</sup>. Regarding this process, it is important to highlight that, concerning the CSD methodology, these categories are obtained by induction, that is, the testimony collected in the first stages is respected<sup>16</sup>.

Finally, the last step consists of producing the CSD. The author simplifies it: “The CSD brings together the set of contents and arguments present in the similar-meaning responses that were grouped into a Category”<sup>16</sup>. Its most striking characteristic is the fact that it is written in the first-person singular. This is done to represent the collective thought that is present in each individual's testimony. Lefevre and Lefevre<sup>20</sup> elaborate on this idea and add: “The CSD is a collective discourse that, in order to signal that society imposes itself on the individual through the unconscious internalization of its discourses, needs to be stated in the first-person singular”.

CSD, with its rigorous methodological steps, enables the synthesis of multiple voices into a cohesive discourse, preserving the qualitative richness of the data while quantifying its recurrence. So, this theoretical-methodological perspective not only broadens the understanding of social phenomena but also provides support for more effective interventions, aligned with the needs and perspectives of the groups studied.

Zermiani et al.<sup>19</sup>, highlights several positive aspects of applying the methodology, including a presentation of results that “gives spontaneity and naturalness to social representations” and “meaningful content and its details regarding the same opinion,” further reinforcing that, due to these characteristics, the technique allows for the presentation of more in-depth results.

In short, the Theory of Social Representations, since its origins with Serge Moscovici, has established itself as an indispensable theoretical framework for understanding the construction and dynamism of shared knowledge in a society. By transcending the dichotomy between the individual and the collective, the TSR allows us to understand how everyday experiences and sociocultural influences translate into systems of interpretation of reality that guide behaviors and practices. Language, as its privileged mediation, reveals the complexity and active nature of these representations.

In this context, the Collective Subject Discourse (CSD) emerges as a methodological tool of remarkable relevance. Its ability to synthesize individual testimonies into a collective discourse, in the first-person singular, offers a unique bridge between common sense and scientific knowledge. The CSD not only recovers social representations in a systematic and transparent way, but also lends density and naturalness to the results, allowing for a deeper understanding of a group's thinking.

The articulation between the Theory of Social Representations and the Discourse of the Collective Subject, as demonstrated, constitutes a robust theoretical and methodological framework for qualitative research, especially around health area. By enabling the investigation of how social groups understand and position themselves on specific topics, this approach not only enriches scientific knowledge but also offers valuable input for the planning and restructuring of actions and public policies, ensuring that these are aligned with the reality perceived and experienced by the community.

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