ICONOGRAPHICAL STIMULI AS A CREATIVE APPROACH FOR SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

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Abstract

Moscovici defined Social representations as systems of values, ideas and practices that serve to establish social order and facilitate communication. They arise in an effort to make the unfamiliar, familiar.

Starting from the Structural Approach, and from a reflection on the role that imagery can provide to overcome the bottlenecks of an exclusive "verbal", we will show that the same word "image" means a wide variety of phenomena. The distinction between picture and image, in fact, will be the starting point of our reflection. In particular, we'll focus on the role of the picture as an iconographic representation and a particular form of image. Moreover we will try to underline that a picture is a concrete object offered to our perception, which exists as such, regardless of our perceptual identity.

On the basis of these considerations, the presentation will be focused on the construction of a new tool called "Iconographical Stimuli", a useful technique of data collecting in the field of the social representation Theory. The aim of this technique is to explore a social representation object, using situated images in a process of communication.

Keywords: social representations theory, structural approach, iconographic stimuli

1 SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY

The Social Representations Theory was created in order to study the way in which knowledge is represented in a community, shared by its members and considered as a true "common-sense theory", covering all aspects of life and society. According to Moscovici (1984a), one of the features of our culture it is the division between reified universes and consensual universes, leading to identify different forms of thinking and a different conception of the world. In reified universes, a phenomenon is explained in a retrospective way and the "cause" is investigated on the basis of theories and explanatory models legitimated and shared by the scientific community. The "scientific causality" is focused on reified universes. In contrast, the "social

causation" in the consensual universes, is totally dependent on our social representations, in which a phenomenon and its effects are directly experienced by the subjects. In other words, in the consensual universes the explanation of the phenomena is provided directly from subjective and personal education of the people, starting from language and personal point of view. The means of access to reified universes is the science; on the other hand, the means of access to the consensual universes are the social representations (Galli, 2006, Moscovici, 1988).

Social representations have been defined as systems of values, ideas and practices that serve to establish social order and facilitate communication (Moscovici, 1984b). They arise in an effort to make the unfamiliar, familiar. Moscovici (1984a) has identified two processes that serve the production of new social representations. Anchoring refers to a process of classification by which the new and unfamiliar is placed within a familiar frame of reference. The meaning of a new object or event is thus anchored to an existing social representation. Objectification is a process of externalization by which the meaning of an object or event is projected in the world through images or propositions. New concepts, ideas or events can be objectified in intelligible ways for the purpose of facilitating meaning-making. (Sammut, Andreouli, Gaskell & Valsiner, 2015).

2 PICTURES, IMAGES, ICONS AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

According to de Rosa and Farr (2001), despite the fact that the image can form an important source of communication, scientific thought has often undervalued it, considering it to be a master of error and falsity. In literature, in fact, the prejudice against the image is proved by the lack of attention given to it by sociologists and social psychologists: a paradox for these disciplines, in a society where visual information overlooks the written and spoken one.

Only the attention to figurative language in developmental or clinical psychology, as well all to perception in the psychology of arts, testify the existence of an interest in forms of language alternatives to the verbal-centrism.

In his comparative study of figurative thought and visual thinking, for example, Darras (1998) proposes a taxonomy useful to classify images centred on four main types: simile-images, which offer a realistic representation of the object; schema-images, which represent one or more characteristics similar to the object and evoke some of its parts without it being necessary to put together all the details that characterize it; iconotype-images, which result in the repeated and recognized use of a given schema; pictogram-images, coincident with an iconotypes validated by a community of users (Darras, 1998, p. 92). These represent, consistently, the figurative characteristics of every object, therefore identifying the sociological or cultural specificity of the individuals. It's important to underline that the objects represented through schema, iconotypes and pictograms do not necessarily belong to the visibly perceptible physical world. This is true, for example, in the graphic representation of a process (the steps in the transformation of a product), of a system of relations (an organigram), or of a phenomenon (the evolution of a wind dynamics). In any case, the schema remains the only possible way to reproduce an image of the object, as it would be difficult to produce an analogical image, a simile according to the previous terminology (Moliner, 2016). Moliner (2008), inspired by this study and reflecting upon the relationship between images and collective beliefs, investigate the role of icons as identifying instruments of a social representation, stating that iconography must be considered as a source, means and product of a representation. According to the Author, when we take an interest in the image of a social object, we are interested in what the individuals have perceived about this object, the ways they have interpreted these perceptions, and what they think about them. That is why "the notion of an image as a phenomenon of collective opinion cannot be extraneous to the notions of visual image, mental image and symbolic image." (Moliner, 1996, p. 111). Therefore, as it is, it must necessarily be part of that small nucleus of elements that gives rise to any social representation as shown by the Aix-en-Provence scholars.

3 STRUCTURAL APPROACH

Studying a social representation, in the Structural approach (Abric, 1994, 2003; Flament, 1994; Guimelli, 1994; Vergès, 1994, 1995), means, first of all, to find out the constitutional elements of the structure. Abric's structural approach consider the representational field as consisting of a central core, and elements collocated around it, defined peripheral elements. Identical contents can correspond to a totally different symbolic universe and, consequently, imply different social representations (Galli, 2003; Fasanelli, Galli & Sommella, 2005). In this theoretical framework, to reach the "significant elements" of a social representation, defined as "essential characteristics of the represented object, without which the object is no longer the same" (Vergès & Bastounis, 2001, p. 21), to identify the position of the elements in the representation (as central or peripheral) and finally, to better catch the organization of these elements, the Method of

Hierarchized Evocation is usually used (Vergès, 1992; Abric & Vergès 1994, Vergès & Bastounis, 2001; Abric, 2003). It consists in a free association task starting from an inductor term. This technique has the double advantage to put together the frequential dimension of the terms and the importance given from the subjects to them. In this methodological perspective a central element plays an important role in a social representation and it has all the possibilities to be frequent in the verbal expression of its "producers". This frequency represents an indicator of centrality if it is completed by a more qualitative information. On the other hand, the importance is expressed by the attribution of a hierarchy between elements indicated from the participants. Only the intersection between these two criteria, makes the identification of constituent, or significant elements, possible. This method is useful because elicit the significant elements and gives an immediately intelligible output to understand how these elements take place into the organization of the representation.

The prototypical analysis (Vergès, 1992) a standard technique used into the Hierarchical Evocation methodology, allows hypothesizing the centrality of each representational element (Abric & Vergès, 1994). It is centred on the correlation between the frequency of occurrence and of the average rank of each term associated to the inductive-word/concept/statement. Before the statistical treatment, all the elicited materials were treated by using a classical content analysis (computer assisted or not) with the aim to cluster all the terms/concepts/statements that are semantically close. (Bonnec, Roussiau & Vergès, 2002). This technique gives a simple (but non simplistic) reading of the social representations' structure and allow the researcher to hypothesize, through a table, the composition of the central nucleus zone, as well as the peripheral and the contrast/complementary elements: "The output of this analysis appears as a 'double entry' table, where elements can be interpreted from the position they have in the four cells. Specifically, the first one (the upper left cell, high frequency and rank) grows the most frequent and important elements, which delimit the central nucleus area. In the second cell (upper right, high frequency and low rank), there are the most important peripheral elements (the "first periphery" of the nucleus), which give useful information to better reconstruct the social practice related to SR object. In the third one (the lower left cell, low frequency, high rank), there are the contrast/complementary (to central) elements, that could configure a nucleus of an SR shared by a minority of group members. The last cell (the lower right, low frequency and low rank), coincides the area of the "second periphery" constituted by the elements less present and less important in the structural organization investigated". (Galli, Geka, Liguori & Fasanelli, 2014, p. 978).

Collected data were usually processed by Similarity analysis (Flament, 1962). This tool has the advantage to better show the organization of the significant elements of every representational structure. The analysis consists of an elaborate matrix of similarity starting from the selected index, which depends on the nature of the relationship among the considered variables. The output consists of a graph, where the significant elements of the social representation's structure are shown with different kinds of links (more or less marked), on the basis of their value and selected threshold. These links express the relations (and their strength) between structural elements and their network (Vergès & Bouriche, 2009).

As well explained by Lo Monaco, Piermattéo, Rateau, and Tavani (2016) the similarity analysis is a method specifically based on the idea that an SR is a set of cognitive elements, interconnected with each other. This method concerns the relationships between the elements composing the representational field. The similarity analysis is based on the criterion of connexity, which represents the idea that, between two elements of representations, there may be a greater or lesser relationship. This can be assessed by the co-occurrence or the co-appearance of the elements in a verbal production of the subject. Thus, between two central elements of a social representation, for example, a relationship index can be calculated based on the number of times these two elements have been connected by the interviewee. This is known as quantitative connexity. The similarity analysis is based on the criterion of co-occurrence between the structural elements of any social representation and was the first method of data analysis in this field to take connexity into account. It is usable on data collected by means of word association tasks and may involve different types of indices, notably the similarity index, based on the co-occurrence of two elements in a corpus, and the distance index.

4 ICONOGRAPHICAL STIMULI TECHNIQUE

Starting from a reflection on the role that imagery can provide to overcome the bottlenecks of an exclusive "verbal", we might begin affirming that the same word "image" means a wide variety of phenomena. Mitchell (2005) suggests a distinction between two English words: picture and image. In particular, he underlines that the picture, is an iconographic representations, a particular form of image. Moreover Moliner (2016) sustains that the picture is of concrete objects offered to our perception. These objects exist as such, regardless of our perceptual identity. As stated by de Rosa and Farr (2001):

If within the human species, the word is a privileged channel for defining, objectifying and constructing reality, nevertheless reality cannot be exclusively defined by means of the word: images, sounds, conducts,

rites […] are other ways of generating and communicating 'multiform' aspects (not necessarily complementary and, in some cases, antagonistic) of social representations. (p. 2)

For these reasons, the methodological perspective chosen for this presentation considers to explore social representations by using the "iconographical stimuli" technique, in line with the constant stripping down that complex images have undergone in recent years, which have transformed the myriad of icons found on our devices which identify and summarize objects, processes and emotions.

In order to create the questionnaire of the Iconographical Stimuli tool, inspired by the technique called Prototypical Stimuli (Galli & Nigro, 1989; Galli, 2006), a group of independent judges is asked to provide a number (functional to the research objectives) of icons, which represent, from their point of view, the SR's object. The resulting icons will be categorized into a specific and coherent number of semantic areas and related categories. Judges has preliminarily the task to eliminate all of the polysemic, duplicated or strongly similar images, and finally, to choose the icon that best represent each of the semantic areas they identified. The result of this selection, which is made when at least 70%[1] of the judges agreed upon the same icon, is randomized and integrated into a questionnaire. Specifically, the questionnaire structure will be essentially the following: a section devoted to the study's aims; a section devoted to the socio-demographical variables; a section devoted to the presentation of all the icons identifying each one by using a letter of the alphabet; a section devoted to participants explanation of their icon choice; a section devoted to the icons ranking task and finally a section devoted to the informed consent for research.

Data collection starts asking the participants to choose the 5 most important icons from among the listed icons, to motivate their choices in writing and to rank them in order of importance. Participants instructions are structured in this way (consider an inductor word that represents the object of the studied SR): 1) "Nowadays people often talk about [inductor word]. Among the following images, choose the first 5 that you consider the best representatives of your idea of [inductor word], by using the alphabetical identifier"; 2) "You've chosen the image marked by the letter X. Could you explain why, by writing a short sentence?"; 3) "Now rank the 5 images you choose, by ordering from most important to least important".

5 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The aim of the presented technique is to explore a social representation object, using situated images in a process of communication. Some image may have no analogous relationship with their object, because it may be symbolic images, which depict one thing and mean something else. Contrary to pictograms (see second paragraph above), whose relationship with the object merges with the consensual recognition of some figurative forms, the symbolic image derives its meaning from a system of correspondences, which goes well beyond the realm of mere depiction. "In other words, the images are translated and selected by different individuals from those to whom they are intended" (Moliner, 2016, p.14). The methodological strategy described in this paper shows us the possibility to identify the iconographical dimension of every central element, which could not necessarily be evoked by participants. Moreover the use of subjective choice motivation in the questionnaire, gave to the researcher the possibility to clearly understand the meaning of each icon associated to the stimulus in the following cases: i) when the icon should suggest other meanings; ii) in the case the icon seems to be completely unrelated to the inductor term; iii) in case of an icon used in a double meaning; iv) to understand the articulation of reasoning behind the selection of an icon; v) to specify the subjective meaning attributed to the icon.

Same remarks can be done for the used set of analyses. Similarity Analysis, in fact, allows researchers to catch the associative network of central iconographical elements, offering an overview of the figurative-symbolic connections of the people's reasoning.

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[1] According to the proportion of units (%-agreement) with matching categories (Krippendorf, 2004, p. 245)

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