

Commentary:

**THE USES AND ABUSES OF CONCEPTS:
AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIALOGUE AND A REPLY TO
IURI CONCEICAO'S COMMENTARY**

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Abstract

In the current issue of JISS, we discuss different forms of human thought related to nostalgia, replying to Luri Conceicao's commentary (2017; see this present issue of JISS). With regard to the distinction between normal and pathological nostalgia, we argue for a socio-psychological approach to the construction of thought as it has been evolved over the last sixty years. We base our dialogue on the theories of social representations, social memory/ oblivion and cognitive polyphasia. Our goal is to bring into the discussion an alternative view of the same phenomena particularly concerning traditional distinctions that reproduce dominant modes of thought and action.

Keywords: cognitive polyphasia, social memory, social oblivion,
social representation, social thought

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COMMENTARY

The constructive comments by Iuri Conceicao (2017; see this present issue of JISS) and his discussion about the distinction between normal and pathological nostalgia offered us the opportunity to take a stand on key issues in understanding human thought and forms of knowledge by bringing into the discussion: social representations, social memory/oblivion, and cognitive polyphasia systems. In order to reply by broadening the debate around this issue, we will describe the socio-psychological perspective referring to the construction of thought as a communication channel, and concluding with its regular and “irregular”, natural and “unnatural”, social and “a- social” forms, such as the example of normal and pathological nostalgia. We would like to point out that our perspective remains open to alternative interpretations.

The socio-psychological approach

A fundamental principle of social psychology is related to the interactionist or conflictual relationship between an individual and a society (Moscovici, 1970, 1984). Taking into consideration this point of departure, it is evident that social psychology becomes a place of articulation of internal, individual, mental, cognitive and biological processes with external and social conditions. Doise (1982) states that the goal of social psychology is related to the articulation of four levels of analysis of socio-psychological reality. These consist of the intra-individual, the inter-individual, the inter-group or social status and the representational or ideological one, pointing out that, “*We are not talking about different levels reality, but for levels of analysis. These are models that were constructed to explain aspects of reality, we do not want to say that reality by itself is structured by four levels*” (p. 28). The aforementioned brief definitions indicate the importance of two interdependent elements according to socio-psychological theorization: the individual and the society.

Social representations

The current discussion focuses on nostalgia as a form of social memory (Halbwachs, 1950/1968), which is in turn perceived as social representations of the past (Haas & Jodelet, 1999). Social representations, one of the core themes of social psychology (Moscovici, 1961/1976, 1984), can be compared, as Moscovici (1998) states, to the “*theories*” of common knowledge, with “*popular*” sciences, situated in everyday life of a society. Representations depend on the individuals’ or groups’ characteristics that construct and use them in everyday relationships and communication. Therefore, representations are produced and consumed collectively. They are partly consensual and partly conflicting. Their consensual nature contributes to avoiding the “Babel Tower” phenomenon, while their conflicting nature is open to individual variations. Individuals construct their thought through two main processes: anchoring and objectification.

Individuals, through anchoring, individuals select the elements of an object that circulate within a communication network based on their identity (group affiliations, knowledge, opinions, attitudes, stereotypes, rules, socio-economic status, ethics, etc.) and through objectification, they develop their representation to orient themselves in the material and social world and rule it. It is noted that the notion of social representation itself reflects both process and content. The processes of anchoring and objectification create content which is determined by the identities of agents and the communication among them.

Social memory/oblivion

Social oblivion becomes prominent in the representational construction of memories (Madoglou, 2010a). We refer to censorship of memory and not a loss of memorial traces that may occur due to old age, drug use, craniocerebral injury or other biological or psychological pathology. Over time, people do not remember details of events, since the content of memory is downsized and becomes abstract and global (Ribot, 1881/2005). People remember recent events in detail, but as they move away from them, gaps and confusions are created, and finally, days, weeks and months are not distinguished at all (Halbwachs, 1925/1994). People forget more than they remember; they are getting rid of infinite information that is useless to them.

Which events are kept in memory, are recalled and become the subject of nostalgia? As Blondel (1928) mentions, events that have a social meaning or value, such as military service, the first Holy Communion, marriage, exams or contests, escape from oblivion. To these events, child - birth, professional success, holidays and travel, studies, first experiences that are unique -first love, first sexual intercourse, first day of school, first salary, etc.- are added to these events and set the identity of social individual (Madoglou, 2010b).

Which events are condemned to silence or social oblivion? Events that are insignificant, indifferent, daily, without a special offer to personal evolution or contribution to a change are not worth being communicated. They remain for some time in memory and then they are forgotten. Events that are important, but their consequences are negative, dramatic, traumatic or cause disgrace to the individual are included in oblivion. Such incidents include (but may not be limited to) sexual abuse, insult, devaluation, rejection, failures, professional or interpersonal defeats, poor performance at school, etc. (Madoglou, 2008). Events related to "oblivion" are not communicated by individuals and whatever is not discussed or narrated as a historical topic, does not actually exist (Perrot, 1999).

Therefore, the representational contents of social memory are conflicting: voluntary - involuntary, memory-oblivion. Madoglou (2010a, pp. 85-86) notes that:

In the march of social history, these contents deal with events of pride and traumatic or shameful events, hegemonic and minority ideas, the dominants and those who were dominated, the winners and the losers,

the rich and the poor, males and females, heterosexuals and homosexuals, adults and children, the white and black, friends and enemies, the advocates of right and left-wing ideologies, employers and employees, natives and foreigners, famous and anonymous, perpetrators and victims, and in general all the opposite thematic dipoles whose first dimension is related to social memory (voluntary form of thought) and their second one is related to the social oblivion (involuntary form of thought).

Normal and pathological nostalgia

Nostalgia can be the product of social memory (Laurens, 2002) and is also selective and silent. To illustrate this point with an example, when people return to their homelands, sometimes they feel disappointed. The relations formed in childhood, teenage years, youth, schoolyears, and academic years include conflicts with friends, colleagues and family members. The past is reinterpreted in the present, undermining the significant conflicts of an individual, and is often converted into an idealized form in order to become useful. In this context, we are wondering how the content of nostalgic memory represents reality, provided that we refer to a selective reconstruction of the past in the present. The selective nostalgic content allows individuals to adjust their recollections of negative or traumatic events to their frame of reference, their values and beliefs. Nostalgia is important in framing individual and collective identities (Brown & Humphreys, 2002).

Reaching to the key point of our argument, we are wondering to what extent is the distinction between normal and pathological nostalgia – which has been discussed in Conceicao's (2017) commentary - necessary in a socio-psychological approach of nostalgia? Is normal nostalgia normative and is pathological nostalgia divergent? Is the former defined as social memory and the latter as social oblivion?

The above distinction, frequently depicted in biological and psychological approaches, can be seen as a discontinuous process, as a historicity. The emergence of modern science, especially from the 19th century onwards, as well as their integration into a constantly renewed conceptualization, are far from an “objective” scientific boundary. The relatively recent pathology of deviant mental illness was treating through amputations, projections, prejudices and divisions “*a wonderfully protected place from historicity, ideological entanglements, and the game of economic and political functions and strategies*” (Dechonchy, 1989, p. 165). A sum of ambiguities, relative values and blurry situations in the formal “scientific” view of mental illness contribute to the demystification of the ‘irrational’ factor and its pathology, while they highlight mental illness as a complex human phenomenon (Canguilhem 1991; Foucault, 1961/2006). Danger though is looming. Different, divergent, marginal or minority ideas and behaviors are often attributed to particular inner psychological traits of the agents and are seen as “non-physiological”/ pathological. This mechanism of psychologization aims to undermine, degrade, repress,

confine or even annihilate the agents of such behaviors or ideas (Papastamou, 1986a, 1986b). In other words, psychological characteristics are attributed to the agent's thoughts and actions and explained exclusively by psychological terms that undermine, degrade, repress, confine, or even annihilate.

Cognitive polyphasia

Purely and solely sociological, psychological or biological interpretations of phenomena disrupt the notion of their interaction and complexity. To better understand the issues in their entirety and more holistically, inevitably, we have to shift from this fragmented, inflexible way of thinking to a more complex and integrative one: the notion of *cognitive polyphasia*. According to Jovchelovitch (2002), cognitive polyphasia is defined as different kinds of knowledge, possessing different rationalities living side by side in the same individual or collectivity. The first who introduced this percept was Serge Moscovici (1961/1976), who observed that different and even contradictory modes of thinking about the same issue often co-exist. In contemporary societies people are "speaking" medical, psychological, technical, and political languages in their daily affairs. In particular, he mentioned that "*the dynamic co-existence -interference or specialization- of the distinct modalities of knowledge, corresponding to definite relations between man and his environment, determines a state of cognitive polyphasia*" (p. 175).

Moscovici (1991) points out that polyphasia consists of four modes of thinking or mental formations: magic, religion, science and ideology. These modes constitute systems of knowledge that have their own domain of validity, but they are at the same time fluid enough to cross-fertilize each other in dialogical encounters (Jovchelovitch, 2008). These systems develop representations and practices that are necessary in communication, on which a rule of "truth" or "efficiency" is imposed, making them fallible or infallible. The following Table proposed by Moscovici (1991, p. 303) represents four mental formations as evoked from the confluence of fallible and infallible practices and representations.

Table 1. Mental formations as evoked from the confluence of fallible and infallible practices and representations

		Practice	
		<i>Fallible</i>	<i>Infallible</i>
Representation	<i>Fallible</i>	Science	Magic
	<i>Infallible</i>	Religion	Ideology

From this table, a contradictory visual distinction appears, and the exclusive nature of the modes of thinking becomes prominent. Science is fallible: theories are criticized, and their results and actions are questioned. On the contrary, ideologies refute the error in their world's view and refuse the slightest defeat in their action plan. Religion presupposes dogma, an infallible representation, underestimating debates and doubts, despite the fact that rituals, prayers and other actions of faith can fail. Lastly, magic is usually represented as a mixture of concepts and images that people share, which is constantly reworked and revised, while, on the other hand, one requires that its practices are efficient beyond the reasonable, succeeding where the others have failed (Jovchelovitch, 2008; Moscovici, 1991).

The way in which representations and practices are constructed by individuals and groups using these modes of thinking can be described as follows: on the one hand, on a contextual basis using one or another mode of thinking for the classification and interpretation of the world and, on the other hand, through the transformation of one way of thinking into another. Cognitive systems are interconnected, and social individuals turn into one or another way of thinking.

An example of a contextual basis of use of modes of thinking is that of Southwest US residents of Spanish origin, have different modes of thinking to classify and explain diseases with traditional ideas or modern medical treatment in private, family, or public contexts. More specifically, they use 1.) the brutal medieval methods, known to the grassroots classes, 2.) the culture of American Indian tribes, 3.) the English medicine, as spread in urban and rural areas, and 4.) the medical science. Depending on the severity of the illness and the financial condition of patients, therapeutic practices pertain to one or another logical registers. Sometimes practices are determined by collective/ magical or religious representations, which are socially defined, or by scientific information. Choosing the one or the other mode of thinking, social individuals are aware of the motives that have affected their choice (Moscovici, 1961/1976).

Regarding the transformation of one mode of thinking to another, Moscovici (1991) refers to the example of religions, which adopted magic elements for their practices, such as the treatment of souls or miraculous therapies and, also the example of science, which incorporates ideological assumptions transforming a theory into an infallible dogma.

The epistemological dialogue that we have developed in this reply to Iuri Conceicao's commentary, makes us wonder whether any divergence from the rule implies necessarily a pathology. Besides, the role of minority social individuals in social change and innovation has been empirically proven (Moscovici, 1976, Mugny, 1982). Do high levels of nostalgia among the elderly people and the "mnemonic self-communication" provide evidence of pathological nostalgia, social roles, the way society is structured or social exclusion? The polyphasic way of viewing and interpreting our world, our thoughts and actions, enables polyphasic answers too.

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