

# Lights and Shadows of Social Representations

## Luci e Ombre nelle rappresentazioni sociali

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This contribution aims to illustrate how social representations can play both negative and positive roles, depending on the use made of them. Beginning with a presentation of the meaning of social representations and an illustration of their functions, this paper offers a reflection on the representations revolving around adult persons with disabilities. How can social representations influence their self perception? What is the risk of these predetermining factors limiting personal independence? On the contrary, how can they be a driver of continuous evolution towards genuine self determination? Finally, the paper offers some reflections on the role that education has, and can have, in all of this.

**keywords:** disability, adults, social representations, inclusion

abstract

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56

## 1. Introduction

The studies that Special Education performs on social representations, in particular towards people with disabilities, and on their functions – which can be both positive and negative – enjoy contributions from a discipline with which it has always been in dialogue: Psychology.

In brief, we can define social representations as tools which our mind uses to proceed to analyse reality. Various authors have dealt with this topic, but it was Serge Moscovici who created a fully-fledged “Theory of Social Representations” (2005). The academic described this phenomenon with the belief that it refers to well-structured concepts transferred from one person to another in order to build a social reality in which knowledge, opinions and behaviour are shared through the same linguistic and cultural code.

Moscovici himself stated that “no mind is free of the effects of primary conditioning imposed by (their own) representations, language, and culture. We think by means of a language; we organise our thoughts on the basis of a system which is conditioned both by our representations and by our culture; and we see only what the implied conventions allow us to, without being actively aware of those specific conventions” (Farr & Moscovici, 1989, p. 28).

In the attempt to better understand what is happening around us, the mind gathers large quantities of information and “codifies” it. As life moves on continuously, and the context in which we find ourselves is constantly changing, our minds are permanently engaged in processing the surrounding reality. The mind uses various mechanisms to carry out this “codification”, the goal of which is to provide us with a more familiar dimension with which we can interact more easily and safely by creating representations.

As implied by the title, however, social representations have both dark and light sides, they can be both positive and negative. We can, indeed, state that they perform a dual function: on the one hand they can be useful in allowing people to live within their context of reference by facilitating active participation (and therefore detecting their positive characteristics); on the other, they drive a series of principles and meanings which could lead to the creation of actual barriers to such participation (in this sense, they allow dark sides, or shadows, to emerge).

Representations are not static, but evolve in the form of ideas which take shape in the everyday context through experiences and interactions via a reciprocal exchange. From this outlook, we can state that social representations, being dynamic and mobile, can easily take shape and be transmitted. Starting out from this premise, we can say that it should be possible for education to leverage the positive aspects created by social representations, and potentially limit any damage from the propagation of negative aspects for one person or for an entire category.



## 2. Representations and Relations

In order to be defined as “social”, a representation must have three characteristics:

- Be shared by a group of people
- Be an expression of a social interaction
- Facilitate communication or an orientation within the group which successively leads to a shared behaviour towards that which is the subject of the representation itself (Moscovici, 2005).

When talking about social representations, we refer both to a process relating to the constituent aspect and to a product which relates, conversely, to the constituted aspect. The procedural aspect concerns both the mechanisms which produce the representation and the processes which intervene subsequently when moving on to communication and social interaction.

The concept of representation is a theoretical theme observed from observed from different disciplinary points of view. Its importance is due to its intimate connection with the encounter (direct or mediated) between two people or groups. The encounter has a foundational nature inasmuch as it is the occasion of recognition of the common existential dimensions, and simultaneously of the difference between “me” and “you”. This has strong implications from an educational point of view, since the educational relationship is centred on the encounter with the other, and at the same time we cannot say that anyone’s social education is concluded if this does not make space for the complexity and unpredictability of the same. Some important thinkers, such as Buber (2004), have focused their work on the event of the relationship with the other as constitutive for the person, which fully manifests itself in the community dimension, the full expression of the social nature of human existence. For these authors, the essence of the person lies only in the community, in the difference between “me” and “you”.

The representations which one has of the other, reciprocally and a priori, can substantially determine the characteristics of an encounter, and at the same time each encounter can redefine and change them.

It was the psychologist Serge Moscovici (2005) who defined social representations as the way to express knowledge in a society, as the organizing principles of symbolic relationships between individuals and groups: social representations depend on day-to-day interaction and, by circulating, take form in a pool of shared knowledge allowing for abstraction, communication and interpretation of the world.

These characteristics are reminiscent of what Husserl defined as “Lifeworld” (Husserl, 1970), a formulation used to indicate the product of the encounter between the indistinct world and subjectivity, in other words that horizon of meaning which makes reference to one’s experiences and which becomes the background against which they stand out and from which all things arise as existent and significant. It is composed not so much, and not only, of facts or ob-

jects, as – and above all – of objects with a meaning, meant as evidence for us (Caronia, 2017).

What makes social life possible is the objectification of representations, which however must be balanced by the possibility for them to evolve through the mechanisms of cultural creativity which can be given – as they can also be removed – in each encounter.

Ida Galli summarises these concepts usefully by stating that “a social representation is a system of values, ideas and practices that enables individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it. It forms a system of reference which allows the assignment of meaning to the unexpected, but it is also a category which serves to classify the circumstances, occurrences and individuals with whom we interact, and is a theory which allows us to reflect on them” (Galli, 2006, p. 30).

In the area of interpersonal relationships, representations take on an important role in that they determine behaviour and expectations which are influenced by them. Once again it is Moscovici who reminds us how “when we encounter persons or things, and become acquainted with them, such representations are involved. The information we receive, and to which we try to give a meaning, is under their control and has no other significance for us than what they give it.” (Farr, & Moscovici, 1989, p. 33). They therefore influence the life of each person. In the specific case of adult disabled persons, they determine the adherence to specific tasks and manners expected by the community of reference.

As a consequence, a collective conscience is formed, which presents itself as a reality in its own right and

imposes itself on the individual consciences, existing through them, but at the same time transcends them through standing out from them. This collective conscience, which ensures cohesion and stability for society, encompasses a set of representations: from mental forms (woven through symbols, legends and traditions) to specific social objects (which relate to the economics, politics and the technical order). Like the collective conscience, collective representations are stable developments which perpetuate themselves over time as a form of social certainty or truth. Once again, as for the collective conscience, representations are internalised by individuals, but exist independently of them (Grande, 2005, p. 15).

Through the reciprocal exchange which occurs within a relationship, people gather information and assessments on themselves, given by how the other sees them. As Carlo Lepri explains so well, the “who am I” is strictly related to the image that others give back to us within social relationships, and the more we are able to see from the point of view of others in their attempt to get to know us, the greater will be the “truth” which we are able to obtain regarding ourselves” (Lepri, 2011, p. 24).

This dynamic concerns all persons, but for those belonging to more marginalised groups, particularly the disabled, this is a very delicate mechanism which weighs heavily on their identity and the chance of them being fully accepted within society.



### 3. Representations and Disability

In encounters, persons enter into a relationship and aim to form cognitive processes which are important in influencing the way in which adult disabled persons organise reality. For people with a disability to plan their existence and think of themselves as “adults”, they must be part of a social context which is willing to recognise them as “adults” and to make the most of their personal resources.

Experience has therefore shown how inserting a person with a disability into adult social groups (such as, for example, the workplace) has a strong effect on their representations of themselves. The working role, in this case, leads to the person acquiring expertise which modifies their identity and the relationships they create during their life path. Ultimately, entry into the workplace, through the psychological action which this role plays, helps to structure the adult identity which allows access to adult social relationships open to inclusiveness (Montobio, 1999; Lepri, 2016). This is undoubtedly a positive characteristic.

There are, however, two main conditions which are required for disabled persons to be thought of as adults:

- The consolidation of a social representation which considers them adult in all psychological, social and emotional dimensions
- The existence of real, useful social roles which are not only connected to the role held in the working environment but also in free-time activities and in emotional and sexual relationships.

In this regard, Lepri holds that the possibility to approach active social roles which, in the interpretation given by the person with a disability, contributes to modifying their representation in the mind of others, opens up new possibilities to access further adult roles, appearing as a type of “existential passport” to adulthood.

Roles, interpretation, representation and even the person as a mask in the immense theatre of life: inclusion or exclusion from the reality of this theatre restricts or increases the existential possibilities of each of us without the distinction of disability or lack thereof, but there is undoubtedly a part for everyone (Goussot, 2009).

Although a social representation which considers adult disabled persons in an infantilised status has persisted in some areas over the last few years, a new representation has emerged which considers such persons as individuals able of building their own lives with freedom to choose and the capacity for self determination (Lepri, 2016).

This is a genuine change in perspective which underlies a process of social inclusion for disabled persons in various areas of life: emotional, work, social etc.; a process which also guides political actions towards the promotion of specific social actions to guarantee adult disabled persons the ability to live day-to-day lives which are consistent with their physical age.

Disciplines such as Special Education have the commitment of is to give people with difficulties in personal and social independence the possibility to achieve dignified living conditions and to facilitate a system of satisfactory relationships.

So as to reinforce their personal self-efficacy, stimulate their ability to act, choose and see their role and identity recognised. All this requires a new approach from institutions, families and professionals in acquiring a way of thinking which facilitates a level of independence for disabled persons centred on overcoming an assistance-type “professional-user” relationship.

Doing so requires the person to be located in an area whose social representations are founded on recognition not only of their needs, but also their rights and on the availability of interventions and services to help increase their well-being: “If I think you are capable, you will become capable; if I think you are incapable, you will become incapable.” (Paolini, 2009).

Social representations influence the ways disabled persons take on day-to-day life. To understand their importance, however, it is necessary to sensitise society to moderate and knowing use of representations and the way that disabilities are considered and treated.

Erikson (1982) states that a stable sense of the self is not possible without a continuous experience of the ego, but Canevaro reminds us that there is the risk of “stereotype captivity”, highlighting how still today it is often the case that disabled persons remain with the “stuck identity” of a victim, or an eternal child, or whatever they are considered as (Canevaro, 2015). Indeed, the stereotype Canevaro talks about precludes the possibility of growth within an identity, because persons with disabilities are frequently not really permitted to experience an ego. The psychosocial dimension is key to building an identity and to learning to act out different roles.

Stereotype captivity reminds us of Carlo Lepri’s reflections on the strong ties and connection which exists on self-reflection through relationships with others. The dimension of reflection occurs on a daily basis for all, but for people with certain fragilities the possibility of having a positive representation of themselves is at play.

Social representations can evolve (or devolve) over time, hardening and settling until a change of perspective – which may also be bottom-up in nature – manages to renew and modify that predefined image. Each era moulds its own representations, and these limited perceptions may preclude any possibility of renewing and reshaping a person’s representation.

When social relationships produce representations which close off, limit and predefine a priori persons with disabilities, they become limiting because this prevents not only the person’s intellectual evolution, but also scales down the self representation they may have of themselves. If the person loses trust, the ability to express themselves, any form of possible independence, initiative and industriousness, they remain trapped in a representation of impotence which is, to some extent, imposed on them. In this manner, their self-assertion is marred and reduced, despite being essential for the growth of their identity and individuality. Thus, if they are considered incapable of performing a task which they are potentially able of performing, at a certain point they will also begin to doubt their own abilities, building up a false self-image.

Returning to Erikson, therefore, we can state that it is essential to allow children to engage themselves in symbolic play, because this is already the starting point in which they begin to experiment with taking on different roles. The adults should therefore be to manage to provide opportunities to perform roles, be-



cause this develops loyalty to commitments and allows the recognition of others. It is not subtractive, but rather additive logic that permits development, leading to living with multiple people and in different contexts.

## 4. Educational Relationship and Representations

The educational relationship rests on the ability to act in an empathic manner of the professional involved in the relationship itself. To this end, Canevaro (2015) talks of a powerful empathy expressed through understanding the needs of the other and the ability to put oneself in their shoes, without however always being to understand what the other really wants. The author highlights that this method leads to the risk of not taking into account the possibility of choice of the person one is faced with, and, if this should occur, it could lead to closure and hardening of the positions taken. On the contrary, competent empathy allows full use to be made of the feelings, desires and needs of the other in a manner which is attentive to that person's evolutionary process. This method is also linked to the contextual expertise, understood as meaning the sum of the other agents, primarily the people present in day-to-day life, inasmuch as personal development is linked to membership of a group. This sense of belonging can be interpreted as a background against which to act, and without which it is not possible to achieve individual development. Having limited, or only a single, belonging leads anyone to experiment with a mono-identity. This turns out to be a concrete risk for persons with disabilities.

Close to empathy and belonging, Fraser and Labbè have further investigated the value of trust as a necessary element for inclusion of persons with disabilities. They define trust as belief in the person with a deficit and their possibilities, considering that they can play an active role in society and can be able to make choices independently. These same authors are convinced that the value of consideration is also necessary, understood as meaning recognition of the dignity that people with deficits deserve in terms of estimation and respect. Finally, the value of the recognition that persons with disabilities must be able to play an active social role and must receive the necessary assistance to allow them to live a successful, fully realised life in the community they belong to.

Such persons must, therefore, acquire trust in themselves in their journey of growth, and this can be possible if they are given the chance to explore their own capabilities, with independence in the activities they are involved in and an active role in their day-to-day social and cultural life. A positive perception of themselves represents the first victory for independence deriving from developmental support.

As a matter of fact,

the barriers standing in the way of social participation for disabled persons are not only architectural ones – equally important are those formed by prejudices (which too frequently affect those “outside the norm”), as well as society's shortcomings when it does not ensure that disabled persons receive adequate education and training, providing them with facilitators and assistance which could compensate for their deficits and allow them

a better quality of life. The first thirty articles of the Convention<sup>1</sup> all embrace the possible fields within which forms of discrimination are often put into place (Gelati, 2012, p. 139).

Social inclusion represents the framework and the background within which each person's life project acquires meaning, including that of disabled persons. The many tasks of Special Education, understood to mean the discipline which studies inclusive processes for persons with disabilities throughout their lives, include the specific one of supporting society in the use of suitable representations in the approach to disability. We agree with Luigi d'Alonzo's reflection when he reminds us that "we begin to overcome exclusion and marginalisation with knowledge; integration of disabled persons is facilitated when the fear they generate and ignorance of their condition are defeated by an ever-more widespread social and educational culture which is able to promote the idea that everyone's rights should be respected and their needs met" (d'Alonzo, 2008, p. 52).

We can state that, primarily, current representations regarding disability are the result of a progressive sedimentation and reworking of the different images that have been generated to give meaning to disability throughout Western history<sup>2</sup>. The way in which we currently approach disability is therefore the result of a series of representations which have collided, come together, overlapped and mixed over time.

Special education is called to work on social representations, particularly unkind ones, because the social issue of persons with disabilities is intertwined, and in certain aspects identified, with that of other marginalised categories (Canevaro & Gousso, 2000).

Experiences linked to limiting representations become very clear when the mirror is moved onto meanings concerning the adult age which often, from the social point of view, turn into goals to be reached (how to enter the world of work, create a significant relationship with a partner, have children, buy a house etc.). Adulthood is understood as a status since it is defined by a series of social, cultural, political and economic interactions and not just as a function of individual biological and physical development. Duties and responsibilities linked with social roles which up until a few decades ago were not even taken into consideration, so distant were they from the representation of what a person with disability could do and had to be (Lepri, 2016).

"Faced with an unsettling social issue such as that of disability, the individual and collective mind tend to transform this extraneous and troubling event (deformity) into something familiar and comprehensible" (Lepri, 2000, p. 122) through the construction of mental schemes and social representations able to provide meaning to this phenomenon.

These representations, as well as ordering and predisposing the behaviour of a community's individuals towards that given category and its members (Lepri,

1 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

2 Over the course of history, there have been various representations of disability, "images", "categories" through which man has tried to make it as comprehensible and familiar as possible (Lepri, 2011).



2011), also determine, as previously mentioned, the possibility (or lack thereof) for that given category to actively participate in society.

Moreover, the disabled person is reflected in these social representations by drawing information, for those conscious and subconscious processes, which form the foundations for identity itself. Indeed, “awareness of the self and one’s own identity develop through social interaction” (Lepri, 2011, p. 25) and the image of ourselves which others give back to us within those relationships.

Social representations are therefore not just a means of understanding for a given object, but also the way in which a person comes into possession of a tool which is particularly useful in defining their identity (Lepri, 2011), specifically that as an adult.

“There is no doubt that, in the process of constructing an adult identity, as well as the previously mentioned difficulties in self planning, the fact that disabled persons belong to a social category around which certain very powerful social representations developed and then sedimented carries significant weight” (Lepri 2000, p. 121).

For this reason, it is not possible to reflect on disabled persons holding active social roles, and therefore their real entry into adulthood, if we do not first take stock of the situation concerning the cultural context since, primarily “the social role of certain groups is often determined more by their belonging to the category than by the characteristics of the individuals within” (Montobbio, 2000, p. 29) and, secondarily, because when a person is placed within a category which determines a devalued perception of them, the social role assigned to that person can only be devalued.

When an individual is placed within a given category, they are immediately asked to meet the expectations which we have formed of the “prototype” of that category, generalising the individual characteristics of that person in order to bring them into line with the expectations which qualify that given prototype. The characteristics of the latter and the expectations linked to it will also define the role which that person can hold within the community (Lepri, 2000).

Substantially, within this interplay of reciprocal influences, the interactions between persons would form part of their identities, through holding different roles. It is easy, therefore, to imagine the power that Goffman attributes to the concept of stigma, in other words the set of discriminatory characteristics which, in the case of disability, are represented by deficits, lack of ability and the inability to take on social roles and responsibilities. The identity of persons with disabilities can therefore be said to be built around a negative, in other words the lack of possibility to take on different roles and parts within relationships with different other than dependent ones deriving from their deficits.

## Conclusion

Moscovici, in his work on social representations, identified what he called two distinct roles:

- a) Firstly, they conventionalise objects, persons and events which we meet during our journey, giving them a precise form, assigning them to a given

category and defining them gradually as a certain type of model, distinct and shared by a group of people. [...]

b) Secondly, representations are prescriptive, that is they impose themselves on us with irresistible force, a force which is the combination of a structure present even before we start to think and a tradition which establishes what we should think (Farr, Moscovici, 1989, pp. 27 and 29).

With regard to communication, representations allow the exchange of a series of shared meanings, both with respect to language and to actions. When individual persons or groups share the same social representations, given actions take on the same meaning for both sides, for the actor and the spectator. In this way the meaning is understood by all individuals, and this allows effective communication. Should the representations not be shared, an incorrect interpretation would occur, and therefore a misunderstanding.

In this case, however, there is a dual process: while on the one hand the representations influence and determine our actions, on the other the exchange and communication influence and determine the social representations themselves.

Through these processes, the social representations consolidate the sense of group membership when we create a reality shared by all parties. The relationships between the members of the group are created on the basis of this shared reality. Moreover, the divergence of meanings present amongst different groups demarcate the various categories, thus also influencing the social relationships between various types of groups.

65

Social representations therefore make what is not familiar, familiar. When we find ourselves trying to understand an event or to relate to an unknown individual through the social representations we have acquired. The shift from being unfamiliar to being familiar allows us to better “manage” our interaction with that specific event or individual. Moreover, all this becomes part of our social reality.

There are many representations and meanings relating to adulthood and they often, from a social point of view, turn into goals to be reached, such as how to enter the world of work, create a significant relationship with a partner, have children and buy a house. As such, adulthood is understood as a status since it is defined by a series of social, cultural, political and economic interactions, and not just as a function of individual biological and physical development.

Today, talking about adulthood means problematising the traditional idea of an adult as a complete person, instead affirming that this is also an age which involves change and development. It is important, however, to note that the social expectations, hopes and frustrations which give meaning to adulthood revolve around the axes of independence and participation. This independence can be interpreted in the construction of a personal point of view and view of the self, of others and of facts which occur. Participation, on the other hand, has a more strictly social meaning, inasmuch as it presents as the individual instance of recognition by the community and, as a consequence, of having a role in society, for example by taking part in the processes of constructing collective choices and/or contributing to the creation, the maintenance and growth of society. We can note how these concepts also contribute to defining persons with dis-



abilities, but in the opposite sense – in other words in terms of dependence and exclusion from a given society's productive systems for goods and meanings.

If this analysis were to limit itself to a purely emotional conception of life, within which all people are driven to reach the same goals and level of development, persons with disabilities would be placed in the position of never being able to become real adults and any interventions would therefore be of a purely rehabilitative and compensatory nature, suggesting an educational action intervening first on the individual and then on the context, with an ever-increasingly specialistic trend. In summary, educational interventions tend to primarily create a progressive approach to the conditions of normality required by the environment through a normalising action on the person.

Re-establishing a holistic vision of the person and recognising their needs, desires and aspirations becomes the precise and challenging task for special education, since moving within the outlook of inclusive education means, on the one hand, giving back an ontological consistency to the person, considered as a whole, and on the other taking the environment, the various life contexts and society as a whole into consideration.

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