

Evidence of the Effect of the Structure of Social Representations on Group Identification

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Abstract : The present contribution focuses on the effect of the structure of social representations on group identification. A social representation (SR) is defined as an organized and structured set of cognitions, produced and shared by members of a same group about a same social object. Within this framework, the central core theory establishes a structural distinction between central cognitions - or 'core' - and peripheral ones: the former are theoretically considered as more connected than the later to group members' social identity and may play a greater role in SRs' ability to allow group identification by means of a common vision of the object of representation. Indeed, the central core provides a reference point for the in-group as it constitutes a consensual vision that gives meaning to a social object particularly important to individuals and to the group. However, while numerous contributions clearly refer to the underlying role of SRs in group identification, there are only few empirical evidences of this aspect. Thus, we hypothesize an effect of the structure of SRs on group identification. More precisely, central cognitions (vs. peripheral ones) will lead to a stronger group identification. In addition, we hypothesize that the refutation of a cognition will lead to a stronger group identification than its activation. The SR mobilized here is that of 'studying' among a population of first-year undergraduate psychology students. Thus, a pretest (N = 82), using an Attribute-Challenge Technique, was designed in order to identify the central and the peripheral cognitions to use in the primings of our main study. The results of this pretest are in line with previous studies. Then, the main study (online; N = 184), using a social priming methodology, was based on a 2 (Structural status of the cognitions belonging to the prime: central vs. peripheral) x 2 (Type of prime: activation vs. refutation) experimental design in order to test our hypotheses. Results revealed, as expected, the main effect of the structure of the SR on group identification. Indeed, central cognitions trigger a higher level of identification than the peripheral ones. However, we observe neither effect of the type of prime, nor interaction effect. These results experimentally demonstrate for the first time the effect of the structure of SRs on group identification and indicate that central cognitions are more connected than peripheral ones to group members' social identity. These results will be discussed considering the importance of understanding identity as a function of SRs and on their ability to potentially solve the lack of consideration of the definition of the group in Social Representations Theory.

Keywords : group identification, social identity, social representations, structural approach

Conference Title : ICSCSP 2018 : International Conference on Social Cognition and Social Psychology

Conference Location : London, United Kingdom

Conference Dates : February 15-16, 2018