

# Chapter 31

## From the Psychoanalyst's Couch to Social Networks

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### ABSTRACT

*Given the important role that psychoanalysis has played in the field of intervention on mental health for many years and the controversial debate that as therapeutical practice has been always originated and recently reactivated, it is of particular interest to discuss the actuality of the SRT 50 years later in the era of social networks. It does so by exploring the dynamics of the interchange between scientific and lay knowledge regarding psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and mental health in light of a corpus of spontaneous conversations among Facebook, Twitter, and Yahoo! Answers users from France and Italy compiled over a one-year period. The study enlarges psycho-social research on social networks, currently under the hegemony of sociometrics and computer science research. Briefly, in this new communicative scenario, the results of the study show how different target groups use new practices, showing their positioning: users act as “infomediaries” of expert knowledge, providing informal help and suggestions online; experts open the doors of their “physical rooms” to “cyber rooms.”*

### INTRODUCTION

The rise of information technologies and the Internet have dramatically changed the ways in which people interact, communicate and represent themselves and the world that they live in (Edwards et Al., 2013). In particular, the recent appearance of social network sites (SNS) is challenging mainstream social psychological research and it requires social psychologists to question their earmarking theoretical tools.

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To date, social psychological research has mainly focused on the application of existing theories to explain the use and impact of SNS (de Rosa, 2012). Nevertheless, the convergence of social evolution and information technologies is laying a new basis for the performance of activities throughout the social structure (Castells, 1996:470-471), so that social psychologists must revise their theoretical traditions in its investigation.

Although research in the past decade has focused on the study of new phenomena generated by on-line social interactions, the underlying symbolic universe of meanings, products and contents of such interactions is still partially unknown.

Exploration of this semantic production can draw fruitfully on Social Representations Theory (SRT) (Moscovici, 1961/1976; 1995; Farr & Moscovici, 1984). In his classic study on the image of psychoanalysis Moscovici investigated how different forms of knowledge encounter and cross-fertilize. His specific interest was in how scientific theories circulate within common sense and what happens to those theories when they are elaborated upon the laboratory of society. Moscovici identified the product of this encounter in social representations (SR), defined as common sense theories on key aspects of the world that allow individuals and groups to represent it and master it (Farr & Moscovici, 1984).

In this paper, we present and discuss the results of research on spontaneous conversations in SNS in two cultural contexts, France and Italy, which followed up on Moscovici's classic study on psychoanalysis. This research is part of a broader research project (de Rosa, 2011; 2012; 2013) comprising: a field study, content analysis of the online press and content analysis of spontaneous conversations on SN.

## **BACKGROUND**

It is important to recall here that the conventional approach of social sciences to the study of SN has been rooted in the field of sociometry since the introduction and diffusion in the late 1960s of such well-known theories as the *six degrees of separation* and the *small world phenomenon* (Travers & Milgram, 1969). These theories have influenced generations of social scientists intent on extending mathematical models to the study of social relationships in terms of network theory and relying on concepts such as nodes (individual actors within the network) and ties (relationships between those actors). Social network analysis (SNA) is the modern sociological evolution of this trend (Carrington, Scott & Wasserman, 2005; Scott, 2004). Thanks to the recent affirmation and visibility of the Web, this approach has become hegemonic in the study of SN (Catanese et Al., 2012; De Meo et Al., 2012).

On the one hand, this trend can be seen as the consequence of the increasing interest of social sciences in computationally intense methods with which to analyse and model social phenomena (Williford & Henry, 2012) leading to the reproduction of “‘habitual practices’ employed by quantitative researchers using the procedures which they are comfortable and familiar with” (Stoneman, Sturgis & Allum, 2012:854). On the other hand, it is possible to identify a significant lack of theory in the study of “what lies beneath” the massive and multiform production of social interaction in new online communication channels, especially from a semantic perspective (de Rosa, 2012).

Research on SR investigated via interpersonal exchanges on SNS may be a valid response to this theoretical challenge. In fact, in the 1990s, Moscovici (1995; 1997:7) provided an anticipatory proposal; he emphasised the importance of investigating new communication phenomena by studying “how common sense, the language exchanged, groups themselves are shaped in this cyber-communication”.

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