

# **Representations of Food, Body and Health**

**Jyoti Verma**

Jyoti Verma, Ph.D.

For the last 40 to 45 years the social representation theory has aimed at overcoming the shortcomings of those currently widespread theories and approaches in social psychology which are based on methodological individualism and epistemology. Therefore, the social representations (SRs) approach has been considered as one of the main paradigms that form post-modern thought and may be seen as an alternative approach for analyzing social lives which generally tend to be reductionist (Collier, Minton, Reynolds, 1991) and which functionally separates the subject from the object (Farr, 1996).

Inspired by the movement favouring “de-individualizing” and “re-socializing” of social psychology, the notion of social representations was formulated by Serge Moscovici in the beginning of the year 1960 who borrowed the term social representation from the almost forgotten concept “collective representation” from Durkheim. For the de-individualizing purpose, this theory offers an integration of the social and cultural dimensions and puts emphasis on common sense and understanding of socially contextualized knowledge, (or social thinking within the local context of time and space) which are to be translated into social communication tools as a frame for understanding the social phenomenon in any place. Having said this it may be concluded that social representations theory seems to have a different emphasis from mainstream North American social psychology in which the dominant concern has been, and continues to be, with behaviour and cognitions at the level of the individual. Social representation theory, in contrast, emphasise the importance of analysis at the collective level.

## **The Concept of Social Representations**

Due to diversity in conceptualization social representations faces questions seeking conceptual clarification. It is asked ‘is it a heuristic concept, a construct, a paradigm, a theory or a phenomenon’? We shall now try to understand this concept which often invites clarification and scope for more articulation by those who are not yet an expert of this line and look at some of the significant characteristics of the concept.

### ***The common sense element in social representations***

First introduced as a concept capturing the specific modern aspects of common sense knowledge in contemporary societies, social representations are now taken

to be a versatile multifaceted theoretical framework for many other social psychological topics. Drawing from the original idea that was to see how scientific theories transform to everyday theories into everyday discourse, in the field of social psychology, the study of social representations had the objective to understand how "common sense" thinking is put into practice in daily experiences?

Common sense comprises of the images, mental connections and metaphors that everyone uses and talks about when trying to explain familiar problems or predict outcomes. It is a corpus based on shared traditions and enriched by thousands of well practiced "experiments" and "observations" (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983, p.103).

Moscovici (1984a) holds that archaic stocks of knowledge in the format of common sense or myths in the classical sense have ceased to exist since sciences have been established and since scientific theories have been popularized. Popularization of scientific ways of thinking (i.e., adoption of parts of scientific theories and results), has led to a scientific rationalization of every day thinking and consequently to the disappearance of certain other forms of knowledge. The interpretive potential of everyday knowledge for science can be seen in the fact that it is not exclusively based on scientific sources, but on other sources such as traditional assumptions or beliefs. For example, the myths and traditions or religious beliefs influence everyday knowledge about health, illness and mental illness and the 'moral loading' of public and private discourses on these topics.

### ***Social representations: a collective phenomenon***

Put simply, social representation is defined as the *elaborating of social object by the community* (Moscovici, 1963, p.13). The elaborated object becomes social reality by virtue of the object's representation which the community holds. Hence "subject and object are not regarded as functionally separate. An object is located in a context of activity since it is what it is because it is in part regarded by the person or the group as an extension of their behaviour" (Moscovici, 1973, p.xi). It is being argued that in social representation theory objects are socially constituted entities because if an object has to figure in a group's world or to be considered as an object of the group, it has to be socially represented. As a result of this, social representation theory is a social constructivist as well as a discursively oriented approach (Wagner, 1996, 1998a).

Wagner (1999) lucidly observes, "A social representation is collective phenomenon pertaining to community which is co-constructed by individuals in their daily talk and action" (p.96). However, he cautions that instead of imagining representations *within* minds it is better to imagine them *across* minds resembling a canopy being woven by people's concerted talk and actions (cf. Sugiman,

1997). Therefore social representation researchers observe talk and action which is related to a social phenomenon or object. It is explained further, that an object is social not by virtue of its obvious characteristics but by virtue of the way people related to it and attributed features and meanings to it in their talk which made this object part of their group's social world. In the same vain, people's actions are often concerted and coordinated by holding and bearing on shared conceptions of the world. It may be said that that the view which group members maintain about a social object is specific for the group and hence, also the object itself takes on group specific social characteristics. Therefore, talk and overt action give the frame or context of description within which the relationship between object and subjects is defined. In sum, the term social representations refers to the products and processes characterizing common sense thinking and practical reasoning set through a social interaction with its own style and logics, distributed and shared equally among members of a same social or cultural group.

***Social representation: Constructing the reality through social and interactive contexts***

Flick (1994) observes that "Social representation-unlike the concept of representation in the cognitive sciences-is not restricted to reproducing a given reality, but is constructive in two ways. In first place, it is not assumed that a reality "as such" exists, but that individuals and social groups produce this reality in interactions and, in the second place, that the process of social representation is a means of constructing reality" (p. 183). Moscovici (1988) categorically states that we must rid ourselves of the idea that representing something consists in imitating by thought or language facts, and things that have a meaning outside the communication that express them. The process of representation is transferred and enlarged from the individual subject into his or her social and interactive contexts. Therefore, there is no social or psychological reality as such, no transparent image of events or persons unconnected with the person who creates the images (p.230).

Similarly Wagner (1994) contends that the common denominator of the different kind of social representations is that they are socially elaborated and collectively shared. The term social representation is conceived, on the one hand, as *communication process* taking place in social groups and, on the other hand, as the *result of this process* (p.205). In one way or the other all social representation results from such a process of communication and discourse. It seems reasonable to agree that the product, the distributed representations that form part of the individuals' everyday knowledge system cannot be conceived of separately from socio-genetic conditions under which it is formed.

It is pointed out that social representations have **socio-genesis** and the specific characteristics of social representations are not shared with idiosyncratic and private knowledge. However, these (specific characteristic) may be differently prominent within each of the fields of research on social representation as the process of socio-genesis may differ (Wagner, 1994, p. 206). In fact, by confirming the social nature of representations, Moscovici emphasizes the aspect of *sharing* (by this he doesn't mean more frequent, diffuse or common in a particular social group, or what corresponds to the average values), but a dynamic conception of "access to the same symbolic and communicative codes".

Jodlet (1984) defines social representations on the basis of three important areas which go beyond that fact that they concern social object. They are **(a)** the condition and context of production; **(b)** the functions carried out within the dynamic social relations and **(c)** the communication process they imply. de Giacomo (1985) contends "one speaks of social representations when individuals produce evaluative judgements on the reality of their environment on the basis of collective criteria, which have a social function in this collectivity, and which have emerged from its dynamic" (p.131).

### ***The dual view of the concept of social representations: Helpful in conceptual understanding of the term***

The term social representation has been explained from a dual point of view namely, *distributed view* and the *collective view*. The dual view gives versatility and possibilities for various interpretations to the concept of social representation. Accordingly, social representations are conceived as:

**1.** Individual attributes, as individually assessable, through shared structure of knowledge and **2.** a social process of communication and discourse .

From the *distributive view* social representations are: **(a)** Structured mental content (*i.e., cognitive, evaluative, affective and symbolic*) about socially relevant phenomenon, **(b)** which takes the form of *images or metaphors*, **(c)** is *consciously shared with the group members*, **(d)** becoming *part of the individuals' everyday knowledge system* and **(e)** which cannot be conceived apart from their socio-genetic conditions under which it is formed (Harre, 1984).

In the *collective view*, social representations are seen as public process of creation, elaboration, diffusion and change of shared knowledge in everyday discourse of social group (e.g., Doise, 1990; Ibanez, 1988; Jodlet, 1989a, Moscovici, 1984, 1988; Wagner, 1994). Let us reiterate that social representations are defined as the elaborating of social object by the community (Moscovici, 1963, p.13). To recapitulate, social representations are: **(a)** Individual attributes, as individually assessable, through shared, structure of knowledge and **(b)** a social process of communication and discourse.

## Function of Social Representation

It is in place to have an idea of the functions of social representation as it is likely to provide a background for understanding the objectives of social representations. Social representation is “system of values, ideas, practices with a two fold function: first to *establish an order* which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly *enable communication*... by providing code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their worlds and their individual and group history” (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii).

We shall soon touch upon the process of creation of social representation and try to understand what happens and how individuals orient themselves in their material and social worlds and master the same during the process of creating a social representation.

### The Objective and Process in Creation of Social Representations

In the above introductory backdrop we may now look at the objectives of the social representations approach and later at the process in creation of social representations. The social representation theory has several objectives such as: **(1)** learning the relation between common sense knowledge and scientific knowledge; **(2)** understanding the generative processes of social thinking and **(3)** revelation of social representations functions (both in association with the familiarization of novelty and explanation of human experiences, as well as in directing of behaviours and communications within social dynamics). The main paradigm of social representation has identified two major processes in the creation of social representations namely, *anchoring* and *objectification* (Moscovici, 1981, p.192). The social representations are generated, maintained and changed through these two processes.

**Anchoring** is held responsible for the integration of new information to the systems of knowledge and meaning that have been present before. It allows something unfamiliar and troubling, which incites our curiosity, to be incorporated into our own network of categories and allows us to compare it with what we consider a typical member of this category. In other words, the process of anchoring representations is about bringing new things back to everyday categories and images and attaching them to a recognizable reference point. To anchor means to classify and label. It may be said that representation is basically a classifying and naming process, a method of establishing relations between categories and labels. Classifying (categorizing) refers to imposing a certain lot of behaviours and rules on somebody. The main feature of a category is that it

offers a model, a prototype which expresses it and provides us with a sort of robot-portrait of all individuals who are supposed to belong to it. (Moscovici 1981, p.193-198.)

On the other hand, **objectification** is a process, where something abstract is transformed to something almost physical and concrete. It means translating something that exists in our thoughts into something that exists “in the physical realm” (Moscovici 1981, p.192). Objectifying means to discover the iconic aspect of an ill-defined idea or being, that is, to match the concept with the image. Once a group has acquired such a model (figurative nucleus or symbolic centre), it is able to speak more easily about what this model represents. The image associated with a word or idea then comes to be treated as a reality, at least as a part of the conventional reality. It may be said that objectifying is a process where an individual reproduces the pre-existing representations, creates new contents and gives them new meanings.

In sum, the social representation theory shows how new phenomena are anchored, objectified and naturalised into the existing social life and culture. The approach of social representations tries to explain what happens when some unfamiliar thing for example like new food is confronted and how we try to understand and explain it (e.g. Deaux & Philogene 2001).

## **Research and Method in Social Representation**

### ***The methodological principles in studying social representations***

Experts point out that people who elaborate representations are something akin to “amateur scholars” equivalent to societies of amateur scholars about a century ago and observe the following methodological principles in studying social representations.

1. To obtain materials from *samples of conversations exchanged* in society.
2. To consider social representations as a *means of recreating reality*.
3. To have in mind that the *character of social representations is revealed especially in times of crisis* and upheaval when a group or its image are undergoing change.
4. *To discover the unfamiliar features*. Moscovici, (1984a) points out “when studying a representation, we should always try to discover the unfamiliar features which motivated the representation and which it has absorbed. But it is particularly important that the development of such a feature be observed from the moment it emerges in the social sphere” (Moscovici, 1984a, p.28).

### ***The scope of social representations methodology***

It has been argued that social representations research has been driven more by theoretical concerns rather than by the concern to demonstrate the practical utility of the concept. For example, Kummerow and Innes (1994) feel that the social representations research is specifically, concerned with questions about *origin of representations* (how they evolve and what functions they serve), their structure and internal dynamics while the broad objective of social representations research is to “develop a better understanding of social cognition by adopting a perspective which looks at the way in which social groups (as opposed to the individuals) make sense of, and communicate their social reality” (p.266).

Nevertheless, the theory of social representations has shown serious concern on research methods and has undertaken intensive discussion on the issue. As the theory sets out to overcome dichotomies between individual and the social as well as the subjective and the objective, the *attempt has been to adopt methodological strategies that are capable of taking into account the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation and paying attention to the context and the diversity of voices*. Faar (1993) advocates the use of multi-methods, while Jodlet (1991) maintains that the methodological options should allow the identification of the conditions under which social representations emerge and function.

Wagner et al., (1999) contend that being a social psychological approach to studying the regularities of social life, social representations theory cannot do without *historical perspective*. Accordingly, “The meanings of social objects which exists in group today were also shaped by events in the past...the approach of social representations allow us to capture macro-social phenomena in their historical totality and dynamics” (p. 100). Therefore, this approach presents a contrast to the theory of attitudes, beliefs and values, which study phenomena only in terms of specific aspects such as evaluations or as cognitions.

For example, if one is interested in the impact of recent history on the people’s commonsensical understanding of “democracy of the individual and of the community” in several eastern European countries, history becomes one of the questions of interest itself. In this sense the social representations approach extends to enabling researchers to examine the *relatively stable cultural, and the dynamic social, political and economic characteristics of groups*.

### ***The methodological diversity in empirical investigation on social representations***

There is methodological diversity in the empirical investigations made in the researches on social representations. While a range of qualitative methods are

favoured quantitative methods are also well represented in the research on social representations. The qualitative methods used in empirical studies of social representations are derived from social psychology.

Wagner (1999) informs us that apart from **unstructured interviewing**, social representations research has used a number of interesting projective types of techniques. For example, representations of mental disorders have been investigated by analysing **subject's drawing** depicting madness (de Rosa, 1987). Di Giacomo (1980) investigated student representations of a protest movement by analyzing the **free association** responses of students towards certain target words having centrality in the conflict. Hewstone et al., (1982) compared the representations of public school and comprehensive English school boys by content analysing **student's essays** describing the similarities and differences between these two groups. In an international project on Food, Body and Health Claude Fischler and his team (2000-2002) used **focus group discussions** to capture the representations of universally popular concepts of food, body and health. However, Kummerowa and Innes (1994) caution that a methodology has yet to be developed which demonstrate convincingly the ways in which social representations evolve and change as a result of group rather than individual process (p. 269).

Several methods ordered from the more qualitative to the more quantitative have been listed by Wagner et al., (1999). We are informed that **ethnographic observation** has been used in a study on the ontogenesis (the science which treats the nature and essence of things) of the representation of gender in England, **analysis of the interviews and media** was done for studying about the public sphere in Brazil, **content analysis of media** was undertaken while looking for the public perception of madness in UK, **analysis of word association** was done in a study about beliefs about androgyny in Switzerland, **survey** data was the method used for studying democracy and individualism in Europe, while **experimental design** was also one of the chosen methods for studying social representations.

### **Analyzing Social Representations**

The main paradigm provides various **conceptual instruments** for the analysis of social representations as finished products. The finished products are:

1. The *contents of representations* that is ideas, imaginary products or symbols.
2. The *forms of the representations* itself that is, individual or collective products which are discursive, iconic, or material and practical.
3. The *form of its circulation* that is, how the communication is generated within the community through various means of communication (conversation, media, institution).

### *Analysis of content, form and form of circulation of representations*

1. The **content** of representations comprise of information, attitude and field of representation (which include image, expressions of values, beliefs and opinion, etc). Therefore, analysis at the content level looks for information, attitude and field of representation.

2. Since **formation of content** is linked to direct social communication, one has to look for dispersion and information gaps, pressure for inference, interest and involvement of the speaker for the analysis purpose because these will affect the cognitive aspects of representations and differentiate natural thinking in its patterns of reasoning, logics and styles.

3 **Forms of circulation** refer to the medium/media through which the communication is sent across (or circulated) and the kind of impact it could have on the represented concept in question. For example, involving media communication, to draw public attention, will affect differently the construction of attitude: type of diffusion that enters opinions, that spreads beliefs and results in propaganda of stereotypes.

### **Fields of Research in Social Representations**

Experts distinguish three distinct fields in social representations research.

First, there is original approach to social representations as ‘folk knowledge of popularized scientific ideas’ (or **folk science**). That is, we are interested in examining how social representation functions during the exchange, utilisation and integration of common sense and scientific knowledge by a particular social group engaged in the process of creating a new or contemporary representation of a social object. In fact, the original idea was to see how scientific theories transform to everyday theories in everyday discourse. But there are not so many studies that fit into this original notion.

Second, there is wide field of ‘**culturally constructed objects**’ with a long-term history, and their modern equivalent. Third, there is the field of ‘**social and political conditions and events**’, in which representations prevail which have a more short-term significance for social life. Drawing from Wagner (1994) a brief description of what the three fields include is as follows:

**The Folk Science:** Public is often ignorant about the scientific rationality which results in a form of “popularized scientific knowledge” this is a condition where concepts and theories become disconnected from their original sources and re objectified into myths of everyday life (Moscovici, 1992, 1994). Not only that, half scientific arguments, if used selectively lend themselves to becoming

integrated into everyday discourse and to being used as arguments in favour of pre-existing knowledge. As such, the folk-scientific knowledge can be used as a source for secondary justification of pre-existing ideological beliefs and serve as an explanation (immaterial or supernatural) of social facts. In this situation normal or scientific explanation helps to master coincidence whereas metaphysical explanation aims at explaining the invisible reasons beyond the visible phenomenon.

**Cultural Imagination:** Social representations research in this field refers to objects with long standing history like sex role, women, mothers and children, illness, madness and handicap as well as human body. Representations of such objects make the world intelligible to the members of social and cultural groups. They encourages social interaction which not only re-creates the objects themselves but also defines the actors as the complementary parts of the objects and gives them a sense of belonging to specific communities and cultures (Gergen, 1982; Wagner, 1981).

A paradigmatic research topic in the cultural imagination field is that of the representation of the human body (Jodelet et al. 1982) as body related images reflect the integration of subjective personal experiences and social relations. On the one hand, the body is the point of reference for the individual's feeling states. On the other hand, social norms and cultural demands regulate the individual's limits and qualities of experiences with his or her body.

**Social Structures and Events:** A third field of SRs research concerns objects with much less long significance in social intercourse. These are representations about social structure and events. As compared to the cultural ones (above) these representations are of short-term historical significance and they have often restricted validity in terms of the size of the populations which subscribe to them, on the other. Characteristic topics of this field revolve around social conflict, such as social inequality, xenophobia (hatred for foreigners), national conflicts protest movements, unemployment, uprisings, aggression of adolescents, the abortion and ecology debates and feminist movement.

### **The Criticism and Arguments Defending the Criticisms**

The well know expert of social representations approach Denise Jodelet argues that the notions of social representation have been criticized because they are regarded too realist; because the question of "mentalist" models are questioned; and because of the dominance they give to the discursive elements. However, she feels that such criticism do not affect much the future of social representations study, which provides languages and communication a decisive role in the construction of representations, which basically are the foundation of social construction of reality. There are little impacts towards the production of this

field of study, which is often put to the front internationally, judging from the number of involved publications (more than 3,000 in several languages).

### **Social Representations of Food, Body and Health: Some Illustrative Cases**

In the above introductory background of the social representations concept and approach we would now like to look at some studies undertaken in this tradition on the universally popular concepts of food body and health. One of such studies in the category of cultural imagination was conducted by the present author in India as part of a major international project on food, body and health under the direction of French expert of this line Professor Claude Fischler ([www.iiaac.cnrs.fr/cetsah/](http://www.iiaac.cnrs.fr/cetsah/)) and the observations from the Indian part shall be presented in some detail for all the three themes namely, food, body and health. Later we shall move briefly across the work undertaken by the University of Helsinki in Finland especially in the area of food and new foods to be followed by some more examples on the themes of health and body by others.

## **Food**

### ***Researches on social representations of food***

Europe has been the leading force for studying social representations of food including genetically modified food and new foods. It is argued that the existing cultural, societal and ideological contexts are influencing the forming of new social representations as new information and knowledge are combined through anchoring with the pre-existing ideas and categories (Abric, 1993; Markova, 2000). This is true for the emerging social representations of genetically modified, processed and new foods in particular.

As already mentioned one of the most important names in this context is that of Claude Fischler in Paris who adopted the social representations approach for studying food cultures along with his colleagues around the world. Recently he published a book with Estella Masson (2008) presenting a comparison between French, Italian, German, Swiss, British, and Japanese people as regards to their food behaviour.

In the beginning of the year 2000 Fischler's international project on 'Food, Body and Health' attempted to address to an important contemporary concern related to some universally popular concepts like food, body and health. It was argued that in today's developed countries, the idea that we need to learn or re-learn how to eat in order to have good health has become increasingly important and it seems that some 'natural' ability had been lost with the rise of contemporary abundance and therefore, some questions of rising interest are

‘how do food cultures react to development, to the globalisation of modern day food production and distribution?’ ‘Do individuals from different countries think about their food, their bodies, their health, the effect of foods on their body, in the same manner?’ ‘To what extent can we conceive of in a global fashion our strategies and discourses, in the domains of public health or the marketing of food products?’

To help answer some of the above mentioned questions and those related to the pulse of the contemporary food cultures, Observatoire Cidil de L’ Harmonie Alimentaire (OCHA) in Paris launched a cross-cultural research program led by Claude Fischler which was carried out over a two-year period (2000-2002) in seven countries and on three continents. Earlier, the relation of man to food had attracted researchers in some developed countries who gave a rich and insightful treatment to the subject from the point of view of other disciplines (see Fischler, 1990; Kass, 1994).

### ***Food body and health project in India (2000-2002)***

The present author was invited to join as the Indian partner in Fischler’s international research project on “Food body and health”. Including India in this international project was significant for at least a couple reasons. First, the social reality of a majority world country having some inbuilt disadvantages like illiteracy and poverty, which are likely to influence the representations of food, body and health and their relationship, seemed to be an important concern to be examined and captured in the representations of these concepts. For example in the contemporary Indian scenario the question of ‘ what to eat’ and ‘how to eat’ might not be as prominent, or identical to that of the affluent countries but the fears and anxieties centred on issues like improper distribution of food, unhygienic conditions associated with production and marketing of food and adulterated food would indeed be some important concerns. Similarly, the arresting issues for us might not be the abundance of food items due to industrialisation and internationalisation of production and distribution and consequently the problem in making the right choice of food. Instead, our concern is more about lack of proper education and information regarding proper diet and health, the social class and social norms related to food culture and the ground realities like crippled distribution system of food, inflation, poverty and at certain places even scarcity of food.

Secondly, India is a very special case in the sense that the Indian ancient literature, dating back to thousands of years on ‘knowledge of life,’ mixes religion with secular medicine and systematically explains the link between food, body, health, overall well being and the self-evolvement of individual (i.e., *Ayurveda*) which is an unique and extremely profound perspective on food, body

and health and their relationship. Therefore, including India in this international project gave scope to study the representations on food, body and health and their relationship in a backdrop which was not only unique but also an expert resource material for the concepts under study.

By utilising the basic research method of social representation in this venture it was hoped that it would be possible to study the representations on food, body and health in the backdrop of a culturally rich and traditional society, currently undergoing transition in the wake of massive influx of information from all the directions and from its own technological advancements. The aim was to see how the universally popular concepts of food, body and health were represented and related, whether there was intertwining of traditional and modern traditions in the representations or the issue of continuity between food, health and medicine in the backdrop of the ancient Indian wisdom on healing and knowledge of life and what were the differential fears and concerns related to food and food choices, in the backdrop of a majority world country's generally deficient conditions, etc. Though the Indian (Bihari) sample was not a real representative sample of India and did not represent the views and opinion of the uneducated, rural masses nevertheless, this source of information was Indian in its spirit and cultural orientation.

The sample of Verma's (2002) study comprised of 35 English-speaking (18 males and 17 females) educated adults, between 30 to 55 years of age, belonging to white-collar jobs/professions. The method of data collection was 'focus group discussions'. Three focus group discussions were run and video graphed. Each group (with one exception) comprised of 12 persons (6 males and 6 females). A moderator's guide was used for running the Focus groups.

## **Same Major Observations from the 'Food, Body and Health Project' on the Theme "Food"**

### ***1. Representations on food***

The participants observed that the constituent elements of food were carbohydrates, proteins and fats that were needed for energy, activity and growth of the body and the intellect. Eating was perceived as a biological activity necessary to run life. At the conceptual level a distinction was made between food and diet. Food was perceived more of a "utilitarian" term and it was said that individuals had a "natural approach" towards the same. On the other hand, diet had to do with "balanced food and calories that did not necessarily satisfy us". A balanced diet comprised of proper quantities of vitamins, minerals and nutrients. Food was conceived as a "holistic nutrient" which determined

individuals' "general thought process" and even "spiritual thinking." It was freely associated with health and positive expressions that referred to its taste and looks.

Food was given a *contextual meaning* and was always perceived in regional or demographic contexts. It was differentially associated with different age groups, professions and socio-economic strata. It was told that food was *culturally determined* because people learned to eat what grew around them and what was traditionally included in their regional food culture. The food culture ran across generations and was strongly associated with festivals and celebrations.

## ***2. Representations of food suggesting intertwining of different sets of knowledge***

In the representations of food we saw combination or intertwining of different sets of knowledge and beliefs. Accordingly, modern, scientific notions and words like carbohydrates, proteins, fats, etc. and the traditional ones such as *satwik*, *rajsic* and *tamsik*, *bhari* (heavy), and *halka* (light) and foods with *garam* (hot) and *thanda* (cold potentials) were heard. It was said, "Food is the basic source of nutrition required for the maintenance and survival of the biological body" for any "bio-chemical reaction" and for health. It was freely associated with words like health, energy and nutrition.

Furthermore, at different points the respondents seemed to incorporate the traditional concepts of taste, (*rasa*) heating and cooling energy (*virya*), post digestive effect (*vipak*), concepts of *satwik*, *rajsic* and *tamsik* foods and nutritional disorders for providing a systematic thinking on the relationship between food and health. It was mentioned that *satwik* food helped get rid of dangerous body toxins and enhanced longevity and made the mind cool and quiet. On the other hand, *rajsic* food was said to generate *heat* and energy, was *heavy* and carried *hot potentials* and was therefore not easily digestible. Indiscriminate consumption of *rajsic* food made individuals temperamentally violent and the mind restless as the heavy and hot food (i.e., *rajsic*) "excited" the mind and made the person "violent" by aggravating the metabolic process (i.e., a scientific explanation).

Similarly, *tamsik* food was perceived as unfit for consumption as it made the body weak, lethargic and sick and the mind cruel, abusive, disturbed and intoxicated. Overindulgence with *tamasik* foods made the person abusive, gluttony, lazy, insensitive, immoral and unrestrained. Although the participants hardly subscribed to these beliefs fully it was widely believed that heavy food was difficult to digest, made one feel lazy, lethargic and drowsy while light food

made one feel "energetic and active". It was observed, "We are what we eat", "a vegetarian's, thinking would be slightly different from that of a non-vegetarian's. We saw some modern explanations for why certain foods shouldn't be eaten at certain time points. For example, it was said that spinach gets insects in the monsoon season and should be avoided while cold foods like curd, guava and cucumber were forbidden for children in winters lest they catch cold.

### ***3. The notion of pleasure in eating, contextual meaning of 'eating well', and eating as a health prompting event***

For understanding whether the Indian participants displayed similar or dissimilar trends, regarding the notions of pleasure in eating, festivity and celebration, quality and individualistic choices of food items in comparison to some of their western counterparts, we examined their views on 'pleasure orientation in eating' and their idea of 'eating well'. Apparently, Indians seemed to have a pleasure-orientation towards food. It was said "Indians live to eat and don't eat to live" or "Eating was one of the most interesting things in life".

For the Patna participants, by and large eating well was about "eating good food full stomach" or "stuffing oneself". In comparison to the French attitude of a "relaxed pleasure-orientation" the Bihari Indian orientation was much more diluted and it was hard to say how much of the "relaxed" part was intact in the stated pleasure-orientation of Indians. It appeared that eating well referred both to the quantity and the quality of the food. In general pleasure of eating was the act of enjoying variety of food one likes to the "full satisfaction of the mind and the palate" at least for the elite class.

The other dimension of the term however, carried a qualitative meaning, and referred to "eating right, nutritious and healthy things", (i.e., fruits, and green vegetables). Therefore, eating as a *health-promoting event*, referred to, "eating according to a regular time schedule", "only when hungry" and the right quality of food to one's satisfaction. It was about eating a delicious but balanced diet, which was well-cooked, healthy and nutritious. In other words, the other perspective on eating well referred to discipline in eating. It seemed that eating well meant following a *pattern of eating* and a *time perspective* (for example, eating well in the morning before going to work was necessary for receiving enough calories for remaining energetic for the whole day). The concept of eating well was also perceived in a socio-economic context. Therefore, for the elite class, *variety* and *tasty food* was important (basically connected to 'pleasure of eating') while for the poor, "large quantity of cheaper quality food" was needed for survival.

#### ***4. The question of individual choice and responsibility***

The observations suggested that the present Patna focus group members subscribed to the *general principle* on the question of individual choice and responsibility in selection of food items. That is, *individualistic philosophy* did not seem to work for them in particular. Someone said, “We eat what mother cooks”. It has been mentioned that food had a contextual meaning which seemed to restrict individual choices. Accordingly, affluent class people food could choose nutritious and variety of foods for the purpose of enjoyment, for the middle class, food was part of the daily chores but for the poor, food basically meant survival. Food was generally chosen on the basis of “physical appearance” and “taste”. “Brand”, “personal preference” and “nutritional value” mattered particularly for the selection of processed foods. Baby food was chosen with caution. These are some evidence about individual preferences and responsibility in selecting food for the self or for the family. However, since the consumer organizations were not active the *individualistic preferences* were not fully safe. POn the other hand, poor could not choose expensive processed food items. In sum, food had a socio-economic context in India without ample scope for the application of the individualistic philosophy.

#### ***5. Food and health and the disadvantaged social reality of India.***

Since food was directly related to health it made sense to examine the relationship between food and health in the context of the disadvantaged social reality of India. Malnutrition was one of the problems of the Indian sub continent. It was observed that certain diseases related to malnutrition were culture specific problems of an economically disadvantaged country. For example, Kaala-Azar a disease known to be “poor man’s disease” affected 99 to 100% of patients who were malnourished. Moreover, most of the tropical diseases were also related with the poor food habit and unhygienic living conditions.

Poverty and illiteracy affected the perception of food, body and health relationship. In Bihar, a large majority of the people were illiterate and one of the real issues for the health of the poor and the illiterates was lack of knowledge about the nutritional value of cheaper food products. By and large, the poor and illiterate masses of rural India couldn’t perhaps understand the food, body and health relationship systematically nor associate the concepts of nutrition, vitamins, minerals and balanced diet with health. On the contrary, those who could afford rich food and were educated often did not observe restraint in their eating habit and life style. Consequently, overindulgence with food and a sedentary life style led them to health problems related to obesity and high cholesterol levels. Additionally, if food and health were directly related then

according to the discussants this relationship had to be viewed in the contexts of age, gender specific requirements of the body and profession, etc.

### ***7. Relationship between food and health***

The respondents seemed to have a well formed notion regarding *healthy foods* and relationship between food and health. Accordingly, “A diet low in fat, having lots of fruits and a little alcohol would be a better diet as compared to a heavy one”. “Food which is easily digestible and does not make you fall sick or gives nauseating feeling is healthy”. Additionally, “healthy food should be clean, properly cooked and fresh”. “Junk or fast food” was unhealthy and one could recognize healthy or unhealthy food by its “looks” “smell” and “taste”.

Some inputs for explicating the relationship between food and health was brought in from the traditional knowledge on the dangerous food combinations or *virudh ahar*. Some commonly known dangerous food combinations were fish and milk, rice and watermelon, and honey and ghee in equal quantities. The group members had heard that “it was forbidden to eat betel leaves after consuming ripe jackfruit” and traditionally, “milk should not be added to salty foods”. Another concern related with food and health was that of control on eating. The observations suggested that conceptually control on eating was considered a good idea but food tempted and taste mattered therefore, control often took a back seat. Lastly, it may be said that the Patna study led to some ***cross-culturally interesting data*** too. For example the observations suggested a co-existence of the traditional (*Ayurvedic*) and the western medicinal systems. Similarly, there was evidence of an intertwining of different sets of knowledge in the representations of the concept food. These have been discussed already.

### **The Helsinki Group and Food studies**

We would now take up the example of the University of Helsinki in Finland which has been interested in social representations of new foods. A project was initiated and led by Hely Tuorila, of the Department of food technology at the University of Helsinki in which Anna-Maija Pirttila Backman of the Department of Social Psychology participated as an expert member on social representations. The project aimed at extensively studying the social representations of ‘new foods’ in Finland. In this project Tuorila defined new foods as foods that are new in a certain context and more specifically new foods are functional, genetically modified, organic, nutritionally modified and ethnic foods in certain context. It was argued that organic foods are new in our present times, ethnic in our culture

and therefore, new to us, even though used by other groups in other times. It was possible to complete a Ph.D thesis under this project.

From this beginning, Pirttila Backman took a lead in studying representations in the realm of basic research on 'new foods' or genetically modified food (GMF) which was very much timely (beginning in the early years of the year 2000) as during this time one witnessed that food cultures were differing globally and changing constantly because of the modern technologies and globalization of trade which generated new food products to the markets but not without bringing along some concerns and anxiety and unanswered questions regarding safety of such foods.

The present author has received the following information regarding the results of the studies done in Finland (personal communication, Anna Maija-Pirttila Backman, September 29, 2008). In a study done by Bäckström, A., Pirttilä-Backman, & Tuorila, H. (2003) entitled, 'Dimensions of novelty: a social representation approach to new foods', the thematic and content analyses of the focus group interview data showed that five dichotomies characterized the social representation of new foods namely: trust/distrust, safe/unsafe, natural/artificial, pleasure/necessity, and past/present.

In another study Bäckström, A., Pirttilä-Backman, A.M., Tuorila, H.(2004) studied 'Willingness to try new foods as predicted by social representations and attitude and trait scales'. The main results were able to establish the new social representations scale for the new foods based on the results of the previous study. The scale finally consisted of the following five dimensions: suspicion of novelties, adherence to technology, adherence to natural food, eating as an enjoyment, and eating as a necessity.

The findings showed that the social representations dimensions were strong predictors of willingness to try GM (genetically modified) foods (predicted by adherence to technology) and organic foods (predicted by adherence to natural foods). Low food neophobia predicted the rated willingness to try snails and passion fruit. Thus, different constructs predicted willingness to try different categories of new foods, and as a whole, social representation dimensions markedly improved the prediction. According to Pirttila Backman most interestingly, social representation dimensions were clearly better predictors of the intention that previously used personality scales. Finally, in another study by Huotilainen A., Seppälä, T., Pirttilä-Backman, A.-M., and Tuorila, H. (2006) it was shown that the taste was even better predictor for the acceptance than the social representation dimensions or personality traits used in the previous studies.

There have been efforts to add the cross cultural dimension to the continuing work on new foods and Italy and Denmark are two countries in which such work has been extended with successful results (Ph.D. thesis defended and

is under preparation respectively). Pirtila Backman and Jaana-Piia Mäkinieniemi have collected data in Finland and Denmark and Jaana-piia Mäkimiemi is presently concentrating on the ethical questions of new foods.

### **Health and Mental Health**

Health and mental health in particular are the other universally popular themes that have been studied by social psychologists who consider the social representations theory and method as an appropriate means for studying these concepts. At this point first we shall have a look at the list of some illustrative researches on the representation of cultural objects which include topics of mental health, health and illness (source: Wagner 1994, p.220). Following which we shall examine the findings of a couple of international studies on health and mental health respectively. In both the studies the present author had a chance to participate as the Indian partner. The observations from the health theme shall be included from the already mentioned international project of Claude Fischler on food, body and health.

Wagner's (1999) list of researches on the theme of health includes the name of de Andrade (1976) who published under the titled 'A propositional analysis of US-American beliefs about illness by using questionnaire and structural analysis. Others in the list are Dross (1991) and Herzlich (1973). Dross reported his observations on the theme of health in German language based on interview data collected from healthy women. Herlitz (1973) was interested in illness, health, hygiene and prevention of illness and wrote a book on 'Health and illness: A social psychological analysis' taking samples from urban and rural areas and various social classes. Herlitz used interview and questionnaire as method for data collection. Furthermore we see the name of Pierret (1986) who wrote in French on the theme of health. The sample of his study comprised of adults of different social class from three French sites while the methods used for collecting the data were interview and questionnaire.

#### **Observations from Verma's (2002) study on the theme 'health'**

##### ***Representations on health***

The focus group members used a common sense definition and a more scientific one for conceptualising health. According to the *common sense* understanding health was the condition, which enabled a person to complete assigned work and perform routine social and professional duties without facing impediments from the body. Unless there was manifestation of some pathology, the person was considered healthy. The second approach was close to the clinical approach as it was heard that health ought to be ascertained on medical

parameters. For example, a person of a particular age, height and weight was 'healthy' if he/she presented a composite picture of mental and physical fitness that was considered clinically normative according to the doctors.

It was observed that *healthy people* were likely to show consistently balanced behaviour across situations and could pull many more hours of work and active life. Discipline in life, eating balanced food, caring for a tired and sick body and exercise were considered important for health and the proper functioning of the body.

### ***Health as an internally experienced feeling of wellbeing***

There were impressions suggesting that health was not just about having a clinically fit body but was also an internally experienced feeling of well-being. Positive thinking assured good health and remaining cheerful and happy helped in experiencing psychological well-being. Satisfaction and contentment with life experiences were considered directly related to health. It was observed that spiritually evolved persons experienced health from 'within.' Health was perceived as a state when the mind and the body were at ease and in harmony with each other and with the environment. Some other mentioned features of health were "being at peace with oneself and others," "being happy," and "sturdy." Yoga and meditation were efforts aimed at acquiring physical and mental health and an evolved state of mind. In sum, health was perceived holistically and was characterized by sound mental state and positive attitude towards life besides the body's ability to function properly.

On the other hand, 'poor health' meant that the body and the mind were not able to function harmoniously or make proper adaptability. A person in poor health could be recognised by his/her weary, tired, pale, frail, underweight, and sick appearance and signs of poor mental health. He/she was unable to function well bodily and mentally despite his/her conscious will.

### ***Illness: Meaning and causes of illness***

Illness was defined as the failure to perform one's normal functioning. Microbes, toxins, alcohol and meat, all were perceived as responsible for causing illness. Other illness causing factors were; malnutrition, deficiency of vital elements in the body, poverty, illiteracy, climatic conditions, polluted food and stress. A very sick person was absolutely unable to perform his/her essential functions, was dependent on somebody else, and was bedridden. A very sick person's mind was likely to be adversely affected by his/her ailments.

Regarding the *process of illness* it was observed that the body becomes sick when it could not fight the invading microbes that caused release of toxins in the body and subsequent damage to the immune system. It was marked that in

case of serious illnesses our immune system broke down and eventually there was permanent damage to the systems.

### ***Health: Some observations in the context of disadvantaged conditions***

There is not much to add here as observations have been presented already under the theme of food and health in the context of disadvantaged conditions. However, one may add to this the observations regarding the impact of illness causing social hygiene factors in disadvantaged conditions. The group members pointed out that noise and air pollution remained unchecked and this could cause hypertension and hearing maladies. Similarly labourers working in coal, silicon and asbestos mines fall prey to diseases of lungs and eyes as they worked under health hazardous environment. Similarly, tuberculosis and rheumatic heart disease were common for those living in crowded conditions. A question asked was, 'how long a poor person could enjoy good health?' Therefore, if a person was not socially and economically well off then despite being physically healthy and mentally sounds, he/she was in a disadvantageous position in the long run.

### ***Some cross culturally interesting highlights from the theme of health and healing***

It may be said that the data did not provide the ancient wisdom of India on health and healing in a systematic manner but still there were glimpse of co-existence of the traditional (*Ayurvedic*) and the western medicinal system as the groups acknowledged the utility of the medicinal properties of certain spices, plants and herbs for the prevention and cure from a few diseases.

Accordingly: "During the monsoon season, blisters and boils could be treated by *neem* ointment and by swallowing small *neem* balls that was actually very scientific". "Periwinkle juice is given to diabetic patients", and "wood apple is prescribed for stomach problems". Garlic and ginger were 'hot' and recommended for winter season problems. Dry ginger and herbs having medicinal properties were recommended for pregnant women and after childbirth. It was strongly believed that 'basal leaves' (*tulsi*) had "preventive and healing properties".

### **Mental Health**

Coming to the illustrative researches on the representation of mental illness, the widely know research is that of Jodelet (1991) and De Rosa (1987). De Rosa (1987) studied social representation of mental illness in children and adults with the help of interviews and the drawings of the respondents. Jodelet's (1991) work entitled 'Madness and social representations' was unique in the sense that it was about the rural population hosting psychiatric patients and their

guests. She used interviews, questionnaire and observation to report her findings. Earlier Schurmans (1984) had studied families hosting psychiatric patients on their guests. The method adopted was interview.

Wagner, Duveen, Themel and Verma (1999) wanted to study thinking about madness in India as they were interested in examining *modernization of tradition* in the context of 'madness'. The study was conducted on thirty-nine middle class residents of Patna, India, who were interviewed with the help of a vignette describing the behaviour of a seemingly mad man or woman. The interview explored their representations of traditional healing methods and of modern psychiatric notions. Besides explanations for mental illness and madness, the interviews also covered the reaction of families and neighbors to such phenomena. It was impressed that the respondents thought of different causes depending on the context, ranging from frustrated desires, shock and heredity to spirit possession.

Furthermore, the observations suggested that the majority's spontaneous preference for modern psychiatric treatment often co-existed with a faith in traditional healing. This faith is strengthened by their family's traditional preference. The results were discussed as an example of a process of modernization of common sense in which popularized scientific notions become anchored in the traditional setting of social structure and family life. The newly acquired knowledge forms a loosely organized social representation confronting a strongly objectified cultural representation of traditional thinking. The study gave glimpse of the process of creation of social representations.

In another publication from the same study Wagner, Duveen, Verma and Themel (2000) talked about co-existence of rarely compatible representations of mental health (i.e., cognitive polyphasia) and cultural change in India. The interview study investigated the way a small number of middle class Patna residents (N = 39) cope with contradictions implied by traditional and western psychiatric notions of mental illness, their causes and treatment. It could be seen that each of the two ways of thinking is situated and used in specific social settings. The study supported the argument that issues of community and health are tightly linked to local cultures and to the system of traditional representations about health and illness.

These systems, however, are rarely static, but are in constant flux through economic and technological developments or 'modernization' that entails new representations becoming part of everyday thinking. In this process the novel often plays the role of an icon of modernity in situations that evoke the idea of progress, while the traditional prevails in more static social structure such as the family. The observations mark how new representations emerge from traditional

and modern sources and how individuals cope with the rarely compatible representations by making them part of their daily discourse.

### **Human Body**

The earlier mentioned Appendix 2, produced by Wagner (1994, p. 220) illustrating the researches on representation of cultural objects with the theme 'human body' includes three studies that published in French language. The first study in this context is that of Boltanski, L. (1971) who studied social groups on body relevant behaviour by using questionnaire. The second study is a longitudinal study which was conducted by Jodelet, D. and Moscovici, S. (1976) on adults of different social classes with the purpose of studying the representations on the human body. The method adopted was two series of in-depth interviews with an interval of 15 years.

The third study in this context was carried out by Jodelet, D., Ohana, J., Bessis-Monino, C. & Dannenmuller, E. (1982) who took samples of adults from different social classes with the purpose of studying the representations on the human body. The methods used were questionnaires and interviews. Jodlet et al's (1982) study of the human body is an example of a paradigmatic research topic in the cultural imagination field (recall the three fields of social representations research). Body is a fit object for study under this field as its images reflect the integration of subjective personal experiences and social relations. On the one hand, the body is the point of reference for the individual's feeling states. On the other hand, social norms and cultural demands regulate the individual's limits and qualities of experiences with his or her body.

For the Indian reference we go back to Verma's (2004) international project on 'Food, body and health' and look for the observations on the theme of body. In Verma's study the focus group members perceived the activities of the physical structure as the 'body's functioning'. The point was elaborated by the argument that when one could perform well biologically and professionally and was able to complete all the routine activities then the body seemed to be 'functioning properly'. The group members held the impression that the mind (i.e., the brain) and the body functioned together in a holistic manner and the body was dictated or directed by the mind for its functioning. In fact, the body knew which food was good for its health and the mind gave indications as to what should be eaten. A fit body was perceived as free of disease and capable of being active.

Interestingly a psychological angle to body functioning appeared with the submission that the body functioning depended on the "positive or negative state of the mind" and was guided by 'intention' and 'will'.

However representations of body were no match to the traditional Indian world view of 'soma' or its relationship with health seen as mediated through the *tridoshas*. In other words, there was no description of the five basic elements ether, air, water, fire and space that constituted the 'soma' and affected the *tridosha's* balance leading to pathology of the body and the psyche. Similarly, the respondents had only a superficial knowledge that *satwik*, *rajsic* and *tamsik* foods had an overall effect on the well being of the mind and the health of the body. There was hardly any glimpse of an integration of subjective personal experiences and social relations in the representations of the body. As the study focused on relationship between food, body and health, body was not treated as the point of reference for the individual's feeling states or gave away impressions that social norms and cultural demands regulate the individual's limits and qualities of experiences with the body.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude it may be said that as part of the post modernist tradition and the concern for de-individualization of social psychology, social psychologists are now introduced to the social representations approach proposed by Serge Moscovici of France in early 60s which gives scope to look into and examine as to what goes on and what is produced when a social collective gives attention to an object of social relevance and common interest in a shared commonsensical manner. The approach helps us understand that apparently familiar ideas, concepts and objects sharing common history and tradition are actually being transformed, constructed and represented in their new incarnation by social groups that are exposed to differential contemporary influences and social and cultural forces that consistently generate new and unique experiences for these groups. It is further of interest to note that objects, ideas and concepts get their new form and character basically by utilizing the scientific knowledge base by the social group who don't or cannot incorporate the exact and precise content and principles of science but would like to use the scientific basis as an explanatory source for convincing that their common sense has in fact a scientific sense. In fact, the original idea was to see how scientific theories transform to everyday theories in everyday discourse.

Further more, the social representations approach suggests that what is socially constructed is also circulated via a social and discursive means by the members of a social or cultural group who share common interest in a particular notion, object or concept and are also the partners in the dispersion, and elaboration of the representation's content through their talk and social discourse. Alternatively the socially constructed representations are popularized through the popular communication media such as the news paper and the television.

The methodology of the social representations approach is equally inviting as it recommends multi-method approach with the possibility to utilize all kinds of innovative qualitative means of data collection that can capture the details and descriptive richness inherent in the splendors of rich narratives and public discourses. The analysis looks into the content and structure of the representations along with the possibility to highlight the contextual and culture specific explanations and interpretation of the socially constructed popular concepts. The paper goes into some details of the observations and examples of social representations approach being utilized for studying the universally popular concepts of food, body and health.

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