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Quality & Quantity
International Journal of Methodology

ISSN 0033-5177

Qual Quant
DOI 10.1007/s11135-019-00908-3



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The anthropological and ethnographic approaches to social representations theory: a systematic meta-theoretical analysis of publications based on empirical studies

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Abstract

This article explores the Anthropological and Ethnographic Approaches to Social Representations Theory (SRT) within a larger research project launched by de Rosa in 1994, aimed at investigating the state of the art of SRT in the social arena faced with social demand. For this contribution, a meta-theoretical analysis was conducted on 174 publications presenting findings of empirical studies and extracted from the *So.Re.Com* “A.S. de Rosa” @-library. Data and meta-data were constructed by using the de Rosa’s *Grid for Meta-Theoretical Analysis* to detect bibliographic, conceptual, thematic and methodological elements regarding our sources. The multi-level analysis included: (a) a descriptive profile and geo-mapping of our data; (b) a Multiple Correspondence Analysis followed by Hierarchical Clustering on Principal Components analysis to reduce the dimensionality of the data and identify the trends in the applied research conducted within these approaches. Results showed that a three cluster solution best fits our data, revealing: (1) a first trend in which SRT is employed generically without reference to its specific constructs (mainly related to conference abstracts); (2) a direction of research focused on the *transformation of Social Representations through practices via social change, communication and knowledge*; (3) a research line adopting the socio-genetic perspective proposed by Duveen and Lloyd (Br J Soc Psychol, 1986. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.1986.tb00728.x>). Our findings support the originality and the pertinence-coherence of the contributions from the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT for the development and societal relevance of research in the field, conducted consistently with the initial formulations of the SRT.

Keywords Social representations theory · Anthropological · Ethnographic · Meta-theoretical analysis · Qualitative · Quantitative

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The present paper is focused on the Anthropological and Ethnographic approaches to Social Representations Theory (SRT), as part of a larger research project launched by de Rosa in 1994,¹ aimed at meta-theoretically analysing the entire corpus of scientific literature on SRT, in order to assess how the theory was diffused and disseminated conceptually, in respect to other theories, thematically and empirically across time and geo-cultural contexts (de Rosa 2013a, 2013b, 2015a, b, 2016a, b, 2017, 2019; de Rosa et al. 2016, 2017a, b, c, 2018, 2019). Developed by Serge Moscovici in the 1950s in France, Social Representations Theory was meant as an important building block in creating an European Social Psychology, complementary to the traditional approaches in Social Psychology (Moscovici and Marková 2006), yet with an overarching aim at bridging the gap between the disciplines in social sciences and their isolated constructs within an emerging supra-disciplinary field, a new map for social thought (de Rosa 2013a, 2017, 2019; Jodelet 2008, 2018; Kalampalikis and Haas 2008; Rateau et al. 2011; Wagner et al. 1999).

SRT was built on constructionist epistemological premises, in an effort to surpass the more individualistic approaches to social phenomena by opening science to the investigation of alternative forms of rationality and social knowledge production. Essentially, this particular framework does not discriminate between developed and underdeveloped cultures, nor between scientific and lay knowledge, as it offers a wide array of models and methods to explore the multiple ways through which people construct, are guided by and control their daily reality through shared systems of social representations. Through his work on SRT, Moscovici (1961) has opened a new avenue of research, the psychology of knowledge, drawing upon the contemporary objections to the sociology of knowledge and consequentially placing emphasis on the communication processes which contribute to the transformation of scholarly knowledge into lay knowledge, which is regarded by Moscovici as the true, authentic knowledge of social groups (Jodelet 2008).

As we have argued above, SRT has a transdisciplinary, integrative nature and high degree of applicability to a wide range of social objects. The latter may be described as *context-specific socio-cultural phenomena* of study. Thus, SRT has known an outstanding longevity in social sciences, a fact which has drawn a great deal of interest concerning the theory's trajectory across time, space and disciplines in the social arena faced with social demand (de Rosa 2013a).

From a paradigmatic point of view, the theory has been employed by different schools of thought, each constituting a specific direction of development for SRT. Hence, each has their own preferred methods and theoretical articulations. Nowadays, we can distinguish between:

- (a) the *Structuralist Approach* (the so-called Aix School)—examining representations in terms of structure, content and transformation (see Abric 2003),
- (b) the *Socio-Dynamic Approach* (the so-called Geneva School)—looking at representations as position-taking principles towards different social objects which define power relations and social structures (see Doise 2005),

¹ Basic information regarding the larger project is available at the SoReComJoint-IDP website at the link: <http://www.europhd.net/sorecom-joint-idp-unified-research-framework-and-specific-project-focuses>. A selection of previous publications on meta-theoretical analysis may be found at <http://www.europhd.net/winter-lab-meeting-2019-scientific-materials>.

- (c) the *Anthropological and Ethnographic Approaches*—exploring how representations shape up identities and how they organize social relations within and between groups (see Duveen and Lloyd 1993; Jodelet 1991),
- (d) the *Dialogical and Narrative Approaches*—investigating the relationship between language/discourse and social representations from a dynamic perspective (see Markova 2008; Laszlo and Ehmann 2013),
- (e) the *Modelling Approach*—proposing an epistemologically anchored theory of methods capable to grasp the multidimensional facets of social representations (see de Rosa 2013b, 2014).

The boundaries between these approaches are not impermeable; researchers have been known to investigate different phenomena as dictated by the specific goals in which they were interested. In reality, empirical research in SRT has always been a source of controversy due to the theory's ambition to bridge the gaps in social psychology between the *individual* and the *social* and, respectively, between the *subjective* and the *objective*. This was translated methodologically into the necessity to consider the complexity of the object of study along with its context (Wagner et al. 1999). Farr (1993) and de Rosa (1987a, b, 1990a, b, 2006, 2013a, 2014) recommend the use of multiple methods for the study of SRs and stress that methods should be used in accordance with the dimension of SRs under investigation. Jodelet (1991) argues that the methodology *specific to SRT* should be fit to grasp the conditions under which SRs are *generated* and *transformed*; later on she recognizes the importance of all the empirical contributions, no matter their methodological orientation, to the development of SRT (Jodelet 2008). Moscovici's response to this is that Social Representations Theory must embrace a methodological polytheism; he encourages tolerance, as “methods are only means towards an end. If they become an end or a criterion of the selection of topics and ideas, then they are just another form of professional censorship” (Moscovici 2000, p. 268; see also Moscovici 1986; Moscovici and Buschini 2003).

Therefore, Moscovici advocated for employing the methodologies best suited for the research goals at hand, and not allow institutional or any other external pressures to unduly influence the process of research planning. Specifically, if a social object lends itself best to investigation via qualitative methods, one should not refrain from employing these merely because experiments are regarded as the best form of scientific investigation. If, however, the object is multifaceted, then the researcher can and should employ the necessary methods to shed light on as many of the object's facets as possible. Following in the tradition set by Moscovici and outlined in the previous paragraph, the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT support a more qualitative empirical application of the theory. In a certain sense, the trend in these approaches oppose a more quantitative take on SRT, which would be specific to the structural and socio-dynamic approaches. The focus of research is placed on the dynamic aspect of SRs on the one hand, and on the group phenomena and elaboration of SRs, on the other (Garnier 2015). Our paper set out to conduct a systematic review of the scientific empirical literature published within the Anthropological and Ethnographic Approaches to SRT. Our main goal was to delineate a clear methodological profile of the research emerged from this paradigmatic trend. Moreover, we expect to find evidence for legitimizing the transdisciplinary nature of SRT as given by the employment of methods and data analysis techniques specific to Anthropology, Ethnographies and Social Psychology alike. Our results will shed light on the potential of SRT to act as a supra-disciplinary field in its attempt at: (a) studying the formation and transformation of meanings, ideology, beliefs, knowledge, and action; (b) undertaking the analysis

of complex social phenomena like—among many others—human rights, mental illness, environmental issues, democracy and their impact on communication and culture (Jodelet 2008); (c) building upon a true anthropology of culture (Moscovici 2000), relevant in the intervention in many applied domains (Negura 2016, 2018).

1 Literature overview

The anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT comprise lines of research guided by the idea that one of the more comprehensive ways to grasp individuals' and groups' social representations is to study them as they unfold (Duveen and Lloyd 1993; Jodelet 2008). What is specific to these intertwined approaches to SRT is that they follow Moscovici's broad grasp of social reality in defining social representations, as best exemplified in *La Psychoanalyse, Son image et Son Public* (Moscovici 1961). Hence, they are not hyper-focused on specific facets of the theory, such as the structure of SRs (the structural approach) or their role as organizing principles (the Geneva School). The approaches treat SRs as the anthropology of contemporary culture (Moscovici 1988; Moscovici and Kalampalikis 2012), as Jodelet explained in 1989: SRs have to be considered as both products and processes, and consequently studied as the articulation between several dimensions. These dimensions are affective, cognitive and social elements embedded in the co-constructed social, ideal and material reality, and they are manifested in language, communication and social relationships.

As noted by Moscovici since the emergence of the theory, there is (and should be) an undeniable connection between anthropology and social psychology (Moscovici and Marková 2006). In Jodelet's book on social representations, Sperber (1989) explains that, although under different names (e.g. cultural/symbolic representations, symbols, beliefs, myths), social representations are studied by all the human and social sciences: (social) psychology, sociology, anthropology, economy, linguistics, science of religions, literary studies etc. However, this concept is pivotal to anthropology, because it is its direct object of study; here, it is encapsulated by wider topics such as religion, mythology, ideology, social or economic institutions etc., all investigated according to social representations. In their field work, anthropologists attempt to reconstruct the representations corresponding to the social and public ones. In their endeavor, they rely on a systematic collection of demographic and historical data followed by participant observation. The data obtained through these methods is then integrated and subsequently interpreted by the researcher(s) according to the context in which it was collected. This process aims to make the data more "palatable" for the readers (e.g. the jargon is often replaced by standardized vocabulary), thus diminishing its reliability. Hence, the nature of anthropological research is inherently interpretative due to the methods it uses: it is impossible to speak about a representation without referring to its content, an interpretation made by the researcher(s) through their own social representations—let us remember that the objects of study in anthropology are the intentions, reasons and beliefs underlying the verbal and nonverbal practices studied. Nevertheless, the limitations of this way of conducting research were taken into account and dispelled by Moscovici himself: "the study of social representations requires us to go back to observation methods. I have no intention of criticizing experimental methods in themselves. Their value is unquestionable when we study simple phenomena which can be extracted from their context. This is not the case with social representations, which are embedded in our language and which have been created in a complex human–environment.

[...] What we expect from employing observation methods is to be able to retain certain qualities of the experiment, while freeing ourselves from its limitations. Observation managed to accomplish this for ethnology, anthropology and child psychology, and we do not see any reasons why it should not have similar results in social psychology” (Moscovici 1997, p. 73).

The most representative empirical researcher for the anthropological approach to SRT is considered to be Jodelet (e.g. de Rosa 2013a; Rateau et al. 2011). As her contributions to this field show (e.g. Jodelet 1989a, b, 1991, 2008), she employs in her research a holistic view of social phenomena in her investigations of social groups. She takes into account their beliefs, knowledge, myths, images, and practices, as they unfold in their daily living. In order to understand these complex social realities, she studies representations in the social milieu in which they operate, because the study of social representations cannot be separated from the context in which they emerge, a position expressed by Jodelet both directly and indirectly. Directly, she claims the study of social representations of a social group is via understanding the place of the subjects’ inscription in a social order and historical moment. Moreover, in order to grasp their representations, one must account for the construction of the interpretations they produce within their culture (Jodelet 2016). Indirectly, through her seminal work *Madness and social representations* (1989), she reveals how cognitive polyphasia is omnipresent in the different types of communication among the villagers. She shows that this cognitive polyphasia emerges from villagers’ necessity to cope with their fear of insanity and enables them to live together with the patients. On the one hand, the villagers know that mental illness is not contagious and that the patient cannot transmit it by germs. On the other hand, they believe in contamination as well on another level that remains un-verbalized as it is difficult to articulate. This level may be seen in actions such as symbolic cleansing and separation of items. Beliefs take the form of folk-fantasies, superstition and convictions of a magical power. Jodelet emphasizes the persistence and coexistence of both forms of knowledge in the speech and actions of villagers, ranging from “biological to social, to ancestral, indeed archaic, representations of insanity with their magic contents borrowed from the realms of animism and sorcery” (Jodelet 1989a, p. 300).

An important theoretical contribution for the ethnographic approach to SRT was *the genetic perspective on SRs*, brought forth by Duveen and Lloyd (1986, 1990, 1993). They set out to investigate the genesis and development of social representations in interactive contexts. To this end, they employed Moscovici’s perspective in explaining social cognition from a cultural point of view, bridging Piaget and Vygotski’s perspectives on children’s cognitive development: the socio-psychological structures through which the child acquires knowledge resulted themselves from socio-genesis, onto-genesis and micro-genesis (Duveen and Lloyd 1990). Epistemologically, Duveen regards SRT as a theory of social knowledge of a constructivist orientation. This approach promotes analyzing how Social Representations are shaped by *socio-genetic*, *ontogenetic* and *micro-genetic* factors which exert their intricately interconnected influences on their elaboration (de Rosa 2013a). From the socio-genetic viewpoint, we can think of Social Representations as being in a constant process of change, of evolution. This refers to the mechanisms through which specific representations circulate within a society, and also to the successive historical processes which continuously transform them over the course of time. From the ontogenetic viewpoint, the birth of a Social Representation precedes the birth of the human baby (Duveen and de Rosa 1992; Duveen and Lloyd 1993). This means that the world in which he/she is born already comes equipped with a set of Social Representations held by the community—to be able to take part in the collective life, the child has to get access to these representations (Duveen

and Lloyd 1993). Finally, the micro-genetic viewpoint touches upon the fact that Social Representations are constantly being shaped up across human interactions, as the actors involved try to reach some form of consensus about the problems at hand through conversation and discourse. Micro-genesis may be a source of change insofar as some of the people interacting may leave the respective interaction with a Social Representation of an object that is different from the one with which they came in (Duveen and de Rosa 1992).

Methodologically, Duveen believes that the study of SRs should focus on the dynamics of their genesis and transformation, as well as the motivational and social factors which influence these dynamics—"the actual subjective dimension of a representation" (Jodelet 2010, p. 17.8). The study of Duveen and Lloyd (1993) is an illustrative example of how ethnographic and anthropological methods are employed in the study of Social Representations. They used *observation* of the interactions of children in two different primary schools to see how the Social Representations of gender in children are developed over their multiple interactive contexts. They focused on how children interacted in the play groups they themselves were organizing, as well as how they interacted in groups formed by the teachers. They further observed all the mentioned references to gender in the school setting—namely children's comments on how their activities were structured according to gender. Finally, the authors also focused their observation on how gender was institutionally represented (and prescribed) by the roles assigned to boys and girls in school plays and recitals in which children performed for their parents. To sum up, the authors point out how the children are socialized to fill in the gender roles they are expected to—and assigned to—by their community, as the members (the adults around the child, the teachers, and so on) already share a collective social representation of gender that the children have to access in order to be able to join the life of that community. Basically, gender identity is constructed both externally and internally, it is about both identifying yourself and about being given an identity by others (Duveen 2001). The authors give a detailed ethnographic account of the activities and contexts in which children develop their gender identity; they describe how the Social Representation of gender is internalized by children over the course of their development, through all the practices and modes of behavior to which there are introduced by their respective community. The children's educators, for instance, often make gender salient by forming different groups for boys and girls, as each of the genders is ascribed to different types of activities. Also, the different objects which are employed in girls' and boys' play bear information about gender mark-ups. Whenever a girl "crosses over" into the boys' play space and prefers their activities, she is considered a "tomboy", which hints toward an acceptance of a transient state of the child, who is expected to grow out of this with age. Similarly, when a boy asserts a typical female identity, by insisting to wear a dress for instance, though not explicitly discouraged by the teacher, he is also advised to wear a masculine item, such as a waistcoat. All in all, the research on SR and the development of gender identity has opened a new avenue in the empirical research conducted within the ethnographic approaches to SRT, by emphasizing the connection between the development of social identity and SRs, best investigated on children with ethnographies.

Finally, after reviewing the main empirical contributions to *the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT*, we may conclude, as Garnier did in 2015, that these approaches set out to investigate the dynamic aspects of SRs: (a) their onto-genesis, socio-genesis and micro-genesis (b) how they develop through anchoring and objectification and transform over time. At the same time, they focus more on SRs as processes rather than products, and adopt a social interactionist epistemological stance (Jodelet 2008).

Thus, the purpose of our paper is to investigate whether the empirical research inspired by the anthropological and ethnographic approaches indeed reflect these theoretical statements regarding SRs, respectively, this dynamic conceptualization of SRT. We aim to pursue this goal by employing meta-theoretical analysis, as it provides us with the opportunity to observe systematically and empirically how the conceptual, thematic and methodological areas of a study are articulated. Our analysis will contribute with empirical evidence to show the transdisciplinary character of SRT itself, as evinced by the systematic use of anthropological and ethnographic research frameworks.

2 For a meta-theoretical analysis of the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT

The need for a systematic review of the scientific literature on SRT has been signaled since 1994 (de Rosa 1994) and, over the years, has translated into a very ample on-going research endeavor. Its aim is to investigate the directions of development of SRT across several generations of researchers and in different geo-cultural contexts over the world. For this purpose, de Rosa created the *Grid for Meta-Theoretical Analysis* in 1994, a research web-tool implemented in the multi-purpose platform *SoReCom "A.S. de Rosa" @-Library*. The Grid is apt for integrating scientific documentation, networking and training in the field of Social Representations (de Rosa 2015a, b, 2017). Thus, it is designed not only to detect classical bibliographic elements, but to conduct systematic analyses of the literature, as it assesses how SRT is employed in a specific scientific paper at several levels: a. the conceptual one (specific SRT constructs, processes, functions and other notional elements); b. the theoretical and disciplinary level (other constructs, theories and disciplines integrated, compared or differentiated from SRT); c. the thematic one (areas of investigation and the specific objects of study); d. the methodological level (research designs, methods and techniques); e. the paradigmatic one (for a more comprehensive description of the Grid, see the next section on Method of the current paper and de Rosa 2002, 2013a). Based on the data collected with the Grid, subsequently subjected to a multi-level analysis, the development, diffusion and dissemination of SRT may be tracked along multiple dimensions, including the paradigmatic one.

Given the specific nature of the anthropological and ethnographic approaches employed in the literature selected as the source for the meta-theoretical analysis presented in this article, which was created based on a methodological (non-exclusive) affiliation closer to the qualitative spectrum (its preferred methods being observation, interviews, document analysis), we set out to investigate the pertinence-coherence between the theoretical articulations and empirical implementation specific to this paradigmatic approach. Thus, the aim of this study is to explore whether SRT has been dynamically conceptualized within the anthropological and ethnographic approaches, in accordance with the nature of the methods specific to it, methods which seek out to observe social phenomena as they unfold in social interaction. As de Rosa pointed out in 2002, the opposition between qualitative versus quantitative methodology, and, almost implicitly, between field studies and laboratory ones, is actually a dispute that has emerged a long time ago in social psychology. Due to the fact that SRT allows for the employment of multiple methods, it has also found its way in this theory. In line with Moscovici's view (2000) in favour of the methodological polytheism and according to the "modelling approach to SRT" (de Rosa 2002, 2006, 2013a, 2014), we believe that an epistemologically justified adoption of multiple techniques based

on different communicative channels—beyond the simple cumulative sum of multi-methods—is preferable to choosing a radical and exclusive position on the type of methodology specific to SRT. To conclude, the modelling approach to SRT (de Rosa 2013a, b, 2014) proposes that the essential feature of prior knowledge may encompass interconnected hubs of social representations of latent cultural objects as a frame of reference; thus, it does not confine the target of the investigation to specific isolated “objects”. As a result, it is essential to operationalize one of the main epistemological premises upon which SRT was built—the supposition of interaction between: a. social actors and the manners in which they position themselves in their social worlds; b. social objects and modalities of communication, characterized by a multiplicity of forms, channels, tools, contexts and scenarios of transmission. These aspects are momentous when investigating the social process of knowledge construction as an assemblage of interconnected systems of social representations, co-constructed and transmitted actively throughout society (de Rosa 2007). This places an additional effort on the principal researcher to adequately translating multi-layered social occurrences into well-defined research designs (de Rosa 2014). The modelling approach has been created to empirically investigate the articulation of social representations with their varied constitutive dimensions and, respectively, with other socio-psychological concepts. This may very well be anchored in various multi-theoretical frameworks, as is the case with multidimensional identities (i.e. place identities and identity theories, collective memory, social emotions and so on). They are elected in accordance with the purported research object explored within and by specific channels/contexts of information transmission. This process hence involves coming up with appropriate methods and techniques apt for carrying through the empirical evaluation endeavour, driven by the theoretically generated hypotheses. The latter refer to the relationship between the concepts under investigation and naturally delineate the techniques to be employed, along with the multi-step data analysis strategies and anticipated outcomes. All the above are connected to the research subject and the type of the communication context employed. Seen through these lenses, the modelling approach permits the unification of several paradigmatic and methodological approaches, evinced in multi-level research designs, “well beyond the cumulative approach of the traditional multi-method, adequate to the complexity of the social representations theory” (de Rosa et al. 2018, p. 7).

3 Method

Sources The corpus of publications analysed in this article consisted of 174 empirical studies extracted in July 2016 from the *So.Re.Com* “A.S. de Rosa” @-library, currently comprising more than 12.000 of scientific papers inspired by all the different approaches to SRT, being the most comprehensive specialised digital library in the Social Representation supra-disciplinary field (de Rosa 2015a, b, 2017).

Technique The sources have been systematically analyzed by applying the on-line *Grid for Meta-Theoretical Analysis* (created in 1994 by de Rosa, version February 2014, and recently updated in 2019 to take into account any relevant developments of the scientific field and new goals of the research program). The procedure for conducting meta-theoretical analysis consists in systematically reading each publication and detecting with accuracy whether the categories present in the *Grid* may be found in the respective paper.

- The Section 1 of the Grid for Meta-theoretical Analysis (*Bibliographic items*) allows us to build a rich set of “meta-data”, mainly referring to classical bibliographic elements, such as: authors, year of publication, type of contributions, publisher, language, author’s institutional affiliation country/continent, inclusion in bibliometric repositories, abstracts, key words etc.),

The following sections (Sects. 2–6) of the Grid are aimed at providing the researcher with a very comprehensive and in-depth picture of how SRT was applied/referenced by the authors in their respective work, as follows:

- Section 2 of the *Grid* deals with the *conceptual level of SRT* through the identification of the presence/absence of specific SRT constructs and its different paradigmatic approaches, across the five schools of thought in this supra-disciplinary field;
- Section 3 takes into account the *theoretical and disciplinary* articulations of SRT with other scientific constructs, theories and disciplines, with which SRT may have been integrated, articulated or differentiated by the authors of the paper;
- Section 4 provides a comprehensive taxonomy of the potential thematic areas and specific objects of study which may have been investigated or discussed in the contribution at hand;
- Section 5 aims at detecting the methodological profile of empirical contributions by documenting specific information regarding the research design, research location, sample size and composition, methods and techniques employed for data collection and data analysis and others;
- Section 6 is dedicated to collecting textual data concerning the coherence between theoretical assumptions and research operationalisations, as they are stated by the author(s) of the papers at hand.

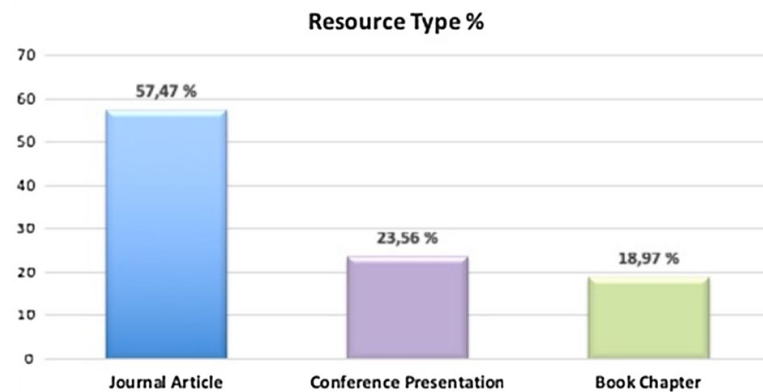
The aforementioned sections of the Grid collect information regarding around 300 categories, most of which are not mutually exclusive; for instance, a paper may refer only to “anchoring”, while others may refer to all the subcategories of “processes through which SRs are formed”: anchoring, naming, classifying, objectification, figurative nucleus, naturalization, unspecified, and processes– others.

Multi-level data analysis strategies The very rich set of information detected from each publication is statistically analyzed in several stages.

First, one begins by compiling a descriptive profile of the data, followed by a series of multi-dimensional analyses aimed at reducing the dimensionality of the data and detecting systematic variations within the corpus of data obtained.

Then, these variations are described by crossing the *meta-data* from Sect. 1 (employed as illustrative variables) with the data detected through Sects. 2–6 of the Grid (the active variables). Given the multiplicity of the datasets and the diversity of the type of data obtained (textual, numerical, categorical), we usually employ Multiple Correspondence Analyses (MCAs) for the dimensionality reduction, followed by Hierarchical Clustering on Principal Components for identifying homogenous trends in our data, always including the aforementioned illustrative variables, which helps us to contextualize our results. We chose Hierarchical Clustering on Principal Components (HCPC) due to its advantages compared to other clustering algorithms, as it employs Ward’s Hierarchical Clustering first to detect a number of clusters based on the decrease in inertia, and then uses this number of clusters as a departure point for the k-means algorithm, therefore consolidating the clusters (Husson et al. 2010a, b).

Fig. 1 The distribution of the 174 empirical studies related to the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT from the *SoReCom* “A.S. de Rosa” @-Library according to publication outlets



4 Results and discussion

4.1 The dissemination of the empirical studies employing anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT across publication outlets

From the 174 empirical publications selected for our analysis, 100 were journal articles (57.47%), 41 were conference presentations (23.56%), and 33 were book chapters (18.97%), as shown in Fig. 1. Thus, it appears that researchers usually choose scientific journals as channels for the dissemination of their findings, and focus less on presenting them publicly or in book formats, probably due to the academic pressure to publish in more reputable/prestigious outlets (de Rosa et al. 2017b).

From the 100 articles selected, only 41% were indexed in one or both Web of Science and SCImago databases, with the majority of them, 59%, missing from both databases: 40% of the publications were indexed in SCImago, 33% in Web of Science, and 32% in both databases, as shown in Fig. 2, which illustrates the names of the journals along with the value of the SJR and the Impact Factor for each of them. This could be revealing of the fact that highly ranked journals may be reluctant to publish research on SRT more anthropologically and ethnographically oriented, as it usually makes more extensive use of qualitative methodologies, or, indeed, of the fact that the authors themselves might be choosing journals according to their thematic areas rather than their international ranking; this aspect should be further investigated by future studies.

4.2 The dissemination of the empirical studies employing anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT according to language of publication

As we may see in Fig. 3, the vast majority of our empirical studies (47.13% out of the entire corpus) were published in English, followed by 27.01% published in Spanish, 14.37% in Portuguese, 10.92% in French, and just 0.57% in Italian. These findings support the fact that English operates as the international language of publication within these approaches to SRT as well, and is indicative of the fact that the theory has surpassed its originally French origins; as de Rosa noted in (2013a), one of the initial obstacles in the worldwide dissemination of SRT was the fact that both Moscovici's first work on SRT (1961) as well as the initial empirical research conducted within this frame (e.g. Jodelet 1989a) were first published in French. Our current findings clearly reveal that the theory has penetrated the English-speaking community of researchers as well. Moreover, we can also notice here the

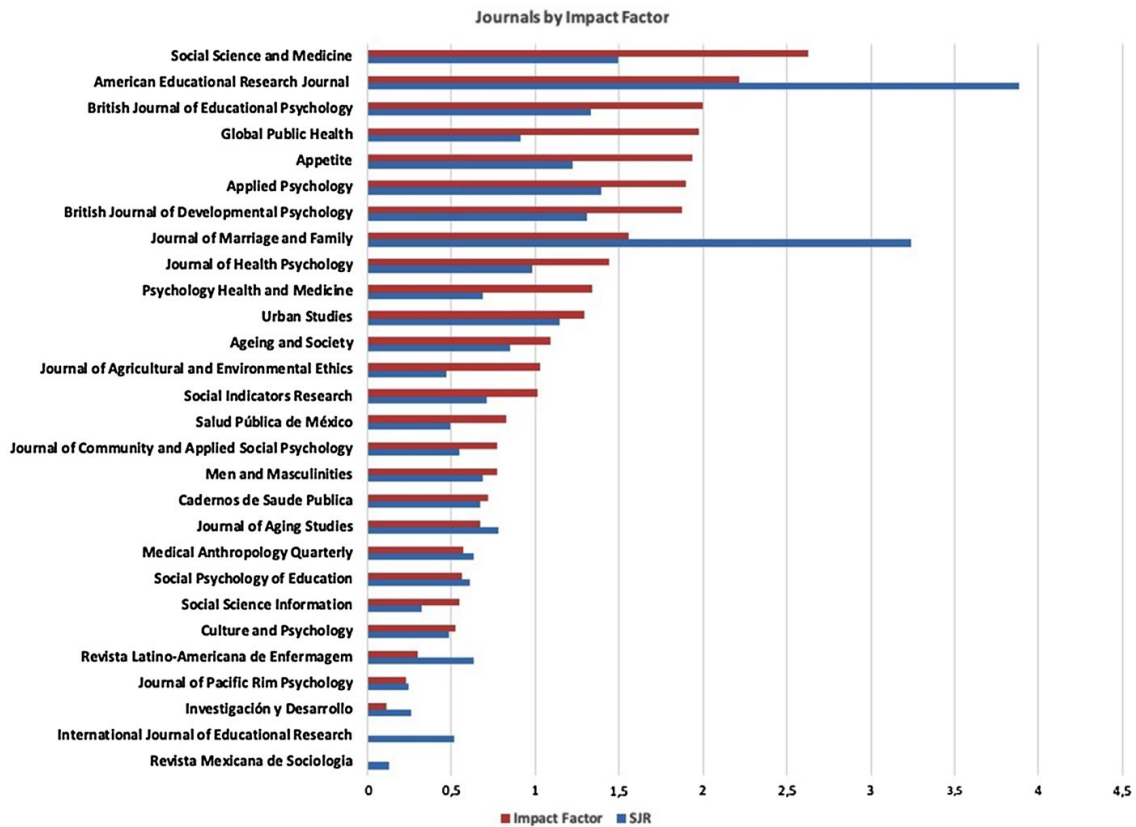
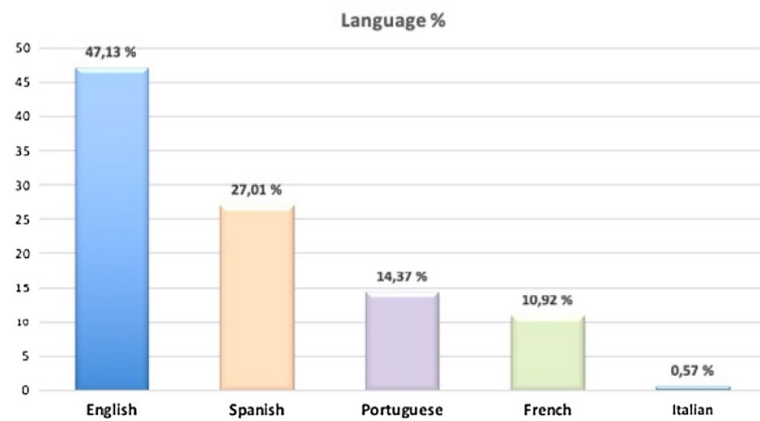


Fig. 2 Scientific journals in which the 32 empirical articles from the *SoReCom* “A.S. de Rosa” @-Library related to the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT were published by their Impact Factor and SJR

Fig. 3 The distribution of the 174 empirical studies related to the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT from the *SoReCom* “A.S. de Rosa” @-Library according to language of publication

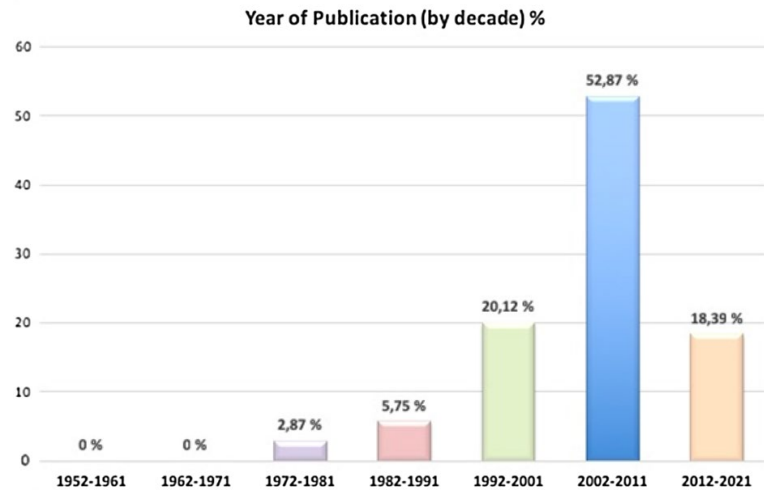


proliferation of research within these approaches to SRT in the Latin American context, as revealed by the fact that combined, Spanish and Portuguese papers account for 41.38% of our dataset.

4.3 The dissemination of the empirical studies employing anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT according to decade of publication

The temporal trajectory that the empirical research conducted within the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT, as depicted in Fig. 4, has followed an upward

Fig. 4 The distribution of the 174 empirical studies related to the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT from the *SoReCom* “A.S. de Rosa” @-Library according to decade of publication



trend since 1972, reaching its peak between 2002 and 2011. However, since the last decade (2012–2021) cannot take into account all the publications which will eventually be comprised in this interval, we may conclude that these approaches are in continual expansion.

4.4 The dissemination of the empirical studies employing anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT according to decade of publication

Figures 5 and 6 reveal the worldwide dissemination of the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT according to the institutional affiliation of the first authors. Our dataset of empirical studies was extracted from a larger corpus of 295 publications which also included theoretical papers within these approaches to SRT illustrated in Fig. 5; we may notice here the dominance of European authors, followed closely by Latin American authors, and more distantly, by African, Asian and North American ones. Regarding our 174 empirical studies, they are geo-mapped in Fig. 6, where we may see that Latin American authors are the most prolific ones, followed closely by the European researchers, and more distantly by the African, Asian and North American ones. These differences are indicative of the fact that Latin America is indeed the “new emerging scenario” in what regards empirical research on SRT, where the theory is employed in an instrumental fashion in order to study objects of high social interest and relevance (de Rosa 2013a).

4.5 Research trends in the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT

For the purpose of our paper, we selected from the *Grid* the categories that reflect the articulation between theoretical conceptualization and methodological application of SRT to become variables in the statistical processing of the data. In order to reduce the dimensionality of the data with MCA, we employed as *illustrative* variables:

- the *type of resource* (conference presentation/book chapter/article in journal),
- the *decade in which the paper was issued*,
- the *geo-cultural context/continent to which the first author was affiliated institutionally*,
- the *language* in which the paper was published.

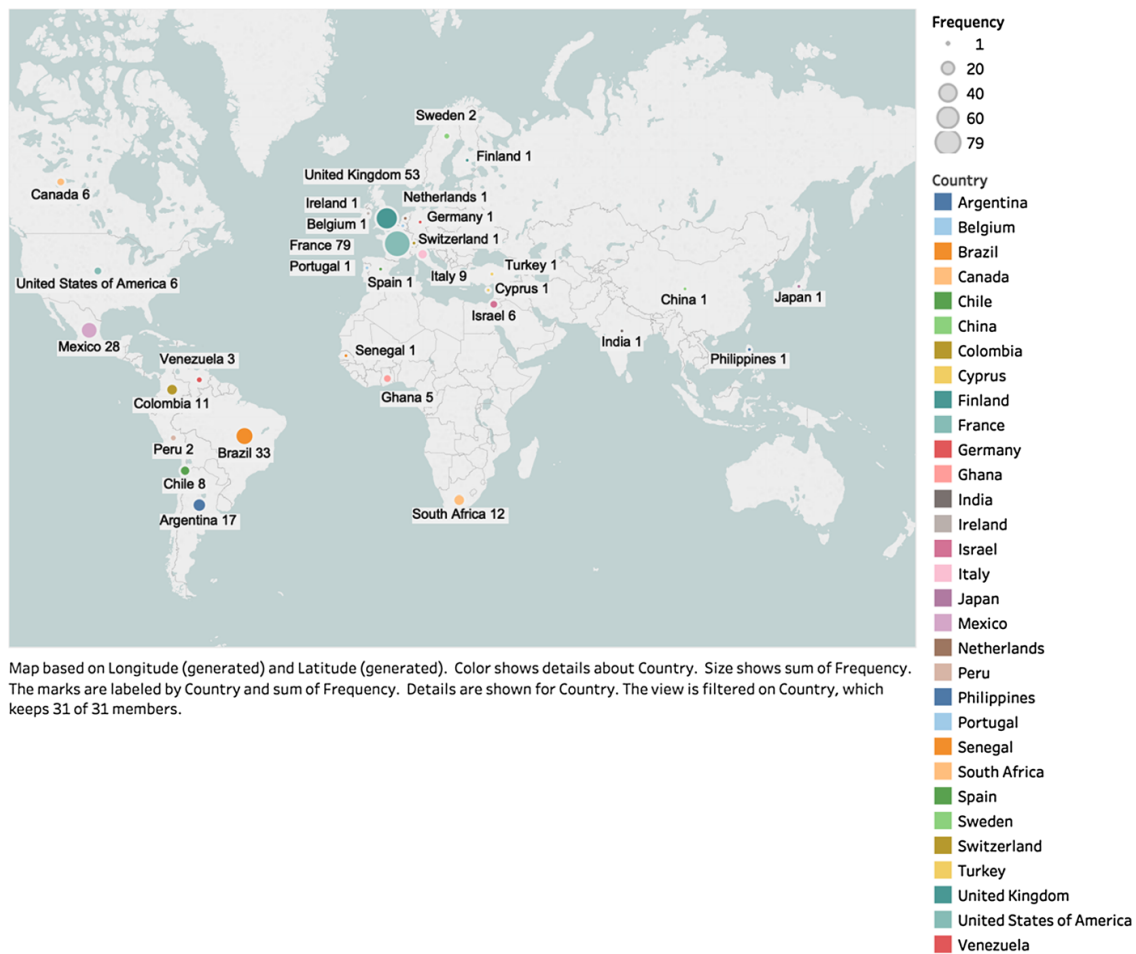


Fig. 5 Geo-mapping of the 295 bibliographic sources related to the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to Social Representations Theory extracted from the specialized repositories of the *SoReCom* “A.S. de Rosa” @-Library by the first author’s institutional affiliation country (performed in Tableau software 10.3)

We employed these variables as *illustrative* as they may provide supplementary information regarding the dissemination and diffusion of the anthropological and ethnographic paradigmatic approaches to SRT.

As *active* variables, we chose the categories that reflect the specific constructs/dimensions of SRT (Sects. 2, 3 of the *Grid*):

- (a) whether SRT was applied *generically* or *specifically* in the paper;
- (b) *the genesis* of SRs (Ontogenesis, Socio-genesis, Micro-genesis), *the processes* undergone by SRs (Anchoring, Objectification);
- (c) *the functions* fulfilled by SRs (Facilitate communication, Familiarization, Guide for behaviour, Orientation and control of social reality, Social identity related functions);
- (d) descriptors of *the structure* of SRs;
- (e) modalities through which SRs are socially *transmitted* (Transmission via Communication, Transmission via Practices, Transmission via Social Identity, Transmission via Knowledge, Transmission via Social Change);
- (f) modalities through which SRs are *transformed* (Transformation via Communication, Transformation via Practices, Transformation via Social Change, Transformation via Social Identity, Transformation via Knowledge, Transformation via Emotions);



Fig. 6 Geo-mapping of the 174 empirical studies related to the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to Social Representations Theory extracted from the specialized repositories of the *SoReCom* “A.S. de Rosa” @-Library by the first author’s institutional affiliation country (performed in Tableau software 10.3)

- (g) *taxonomy* of SRs (emancipated, polemic and hegemonic);
- (h) whether *meta-theoretical considerations* are included in the paper.

In addition to this, we included as *active* variables the categories referring to the presence/absence of other constructs/theories/disciplinary approaches *distinct from SRT, but often found in relation to it*, all the while specifying the type of relation found in the paper (e.g. integration, comparison, differentiation, replacement):

- *Constructs* Action, Assimilation, Attitude, Attribution, Behaviour, Belief system, Categorisation, Change, Cognitive representations, Cognitive schemas and processes, Collective representations, Common sense, Communication, Consensus, Context, Coping, Cultural knowledge, Development, Emotions and feelings, Habitus, Identity, Ideology, Image, Individual representations, Judgment, Language, Metaphor, Motivation, Myth, Norm, Opinion, Perception, Practice, Prejudice, Projection, Prototype, Self, Social memory, Social processes, Stereotype, Stigma, Symbol, Themata, Value;
- *Theories* Attitude Theories, Attribution Theory, Behaviourist Theories, Social Cognition Theories, Social Constructionism, Social Identity Theories, Social Interactionism Theories, Socio-Cultural Theories, Symbolic Interactionism,
- *Approaches* Anthropological Approaches, Developmental Approaches, Ethnographic Approach, Philosophical Approaches, Psychodynamic Approaches, Sociological Approach.

Furthermore, in order to ascertain potential relationships between how SRT is conceptualized in empirical studies and the *thematic area of the object of study*, we also included in our analyses as active variables the broader categories that positioned the publication *thematically*: Culture, Deviance, Development-Education, Gender and family roles, Economics-Work-Organisation, Environment, Health-Illness, Identity, Intergroup relations and dimensions, Politics-Ideology, SRT and methodological issues.

Finally, the active variables referring to the “*methodological profile*” of our publications were:

- *type of research design* (descriptive/quasi-experimental/experimental/unspecified),
- *research location* (field/laboratory),
- *sampling strategy* (random/convenience/quota/representative/unspecified),
- *unit of analysis* (individuals/groups without history/groups with history),
- *method* (structured instruments, open instruments, figurative techniques, observation techniques).
- *qualitative data analysis techniques* and *quantitative data analysis techniques*.

Upon performing the MCA, HC was conducted on the first 68 resulting dimensions, thus retaining 90% of the inertia (Figs. 7, 8), after which the clusters were consolidated with the *k-means algorithm* (Figs. 9, 10).

The clustering solution reveals three lines of research in our approach, each represented by the three clusters. The first cluster comprises a third (32.76%) of the publications, while the second cluster represents almost half of the corpus, 47.7%, and the third cluster, the narrowest direction of research, as it consists of a fifth of the data – 19.54%.

Cluster 1 represents the *generic line of research in our approach*, as it is not significantly associated with *any specific references to SRT or other theories and disciplines from social sciences*. Thus, it illustrates the empirical applicability of SRT, which is argued to be apt at capturing social phenomena of high interest (de Rosa 2013a, 2016a, 2019), and hence, often used in a very applied manner, as it appears to be the case for our cluster, since its only significant associations are with *an applied thematic area* (Economy-Work-Organisation), *a type of paper* (Conference presentations) and, respectively, *a technical methodological aspect*, namely a sampling strategy—*representative sampling*. We should mention a potential limitation of our study, which is the fact that conference presentations were often available in abstract form only, which may have influenced the generic orientation of the cluster. However, although 73.17% of all the *conference presentations* in our corpus are within this cluster, only 52.63% of the cluster's composition is made up of conference presentations, which means that almost a half of the papers here are full-length, meaning they employ SRT more generically than the ones in the other clusters.

Cluster 2 reveals the most representative line of research in our approach, comprising mostly *journal articles* (77.11% of all the journal articles in our sample are here) published in *Latin America* (57.3% of the elements of this cluster were issued by Latin American authors) mostly in *Spanish* (65.96%) during 2002–2011 (61.45%). Its strongest significant associations reveal that this direction of research studies SRT from the angle of *practices in context*, aspect emphasized by the high association between this cluster and *the transformation of SRs through practices*. In addition to this, Cluster 2 is also significantly associated to other theoretical conceptualizations which reveal the dynamic character of SRs, such as their *transformation via social change, communication and knowledge*, as well as *both the processes through which they are formed*

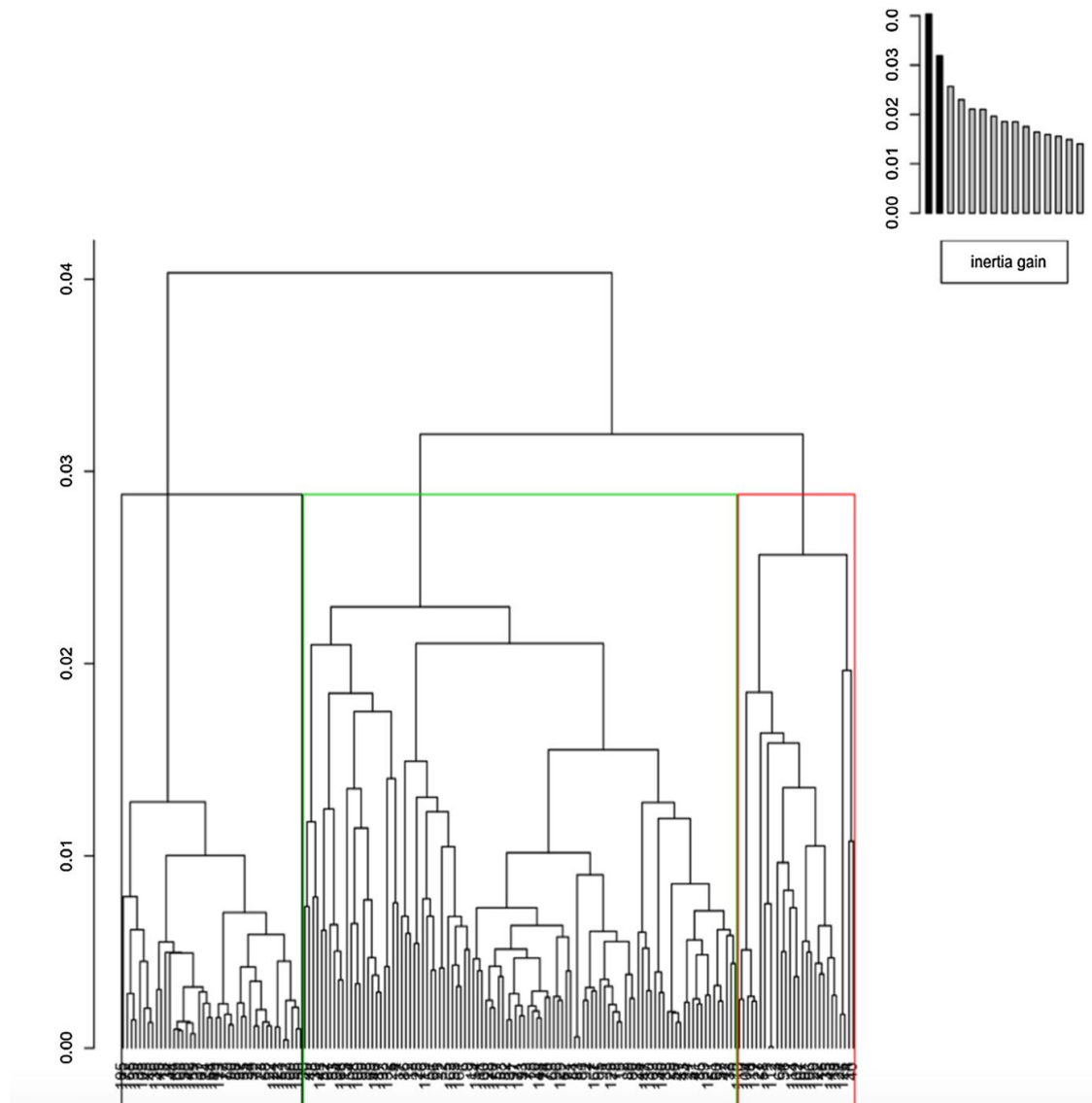


Fig. 7 Hierarchical clustering (Ward's criterion) illustrating the inertia gain for the HCPC performed on the 174 empirical publications on the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT in R 3.3.2

(*objectification and anchoring*), how they are *transmitted through social change* and, last but not least, *how SRs are shaped up in the inter-individual interaction (micro-genesis)*.

These theoretical dimensions are articulated with methods specific to our approach, the *qualitative* ones, as they use *observant techniques, open instruments and qualitative data analysis techniques*, mainly in *descriptive field* investigations, conducted on *convenience samples*, mostly made up of *participants pertaining to “real groups”*, that is members of groups formed prior to the research, which share a common history, studied as groups. Thus, we may conclude that this line of research studies SRs as a *process* more than as a *product*, both theoretically and methodologically, thus complying with the prescriptions for our approach, as stated for example by Jodelet (2008) and Garnier (2015). In addition to this, taking a look at the paragons for Cluster 2 as well (in the order of their proximity to the cluster's centroid: Perez and Foio 2005; Teixeira et al. 2012; Climent 2006; Nuño-Gutiérrez and Gonzalez Forteza 2004; Campo-Redondo and Labarca Reverol 2009), we find that this direction was inspired and follows the lines

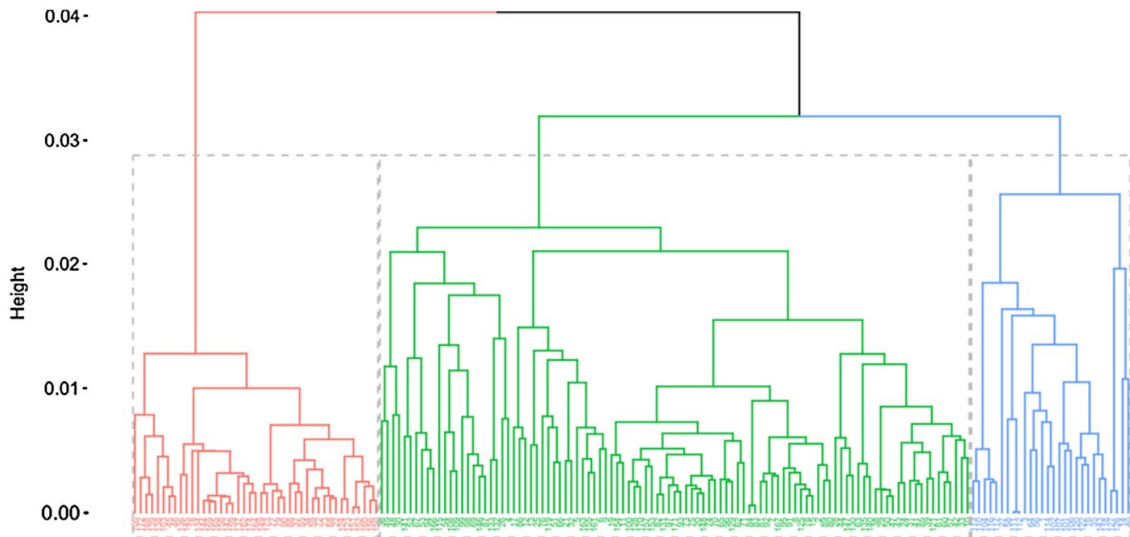


Fig. 8 Hierarchical clustering (Ward's criterion)—initial partitioning for the HCPC performed on the 174 empirical publications on the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT in R 3.3.2

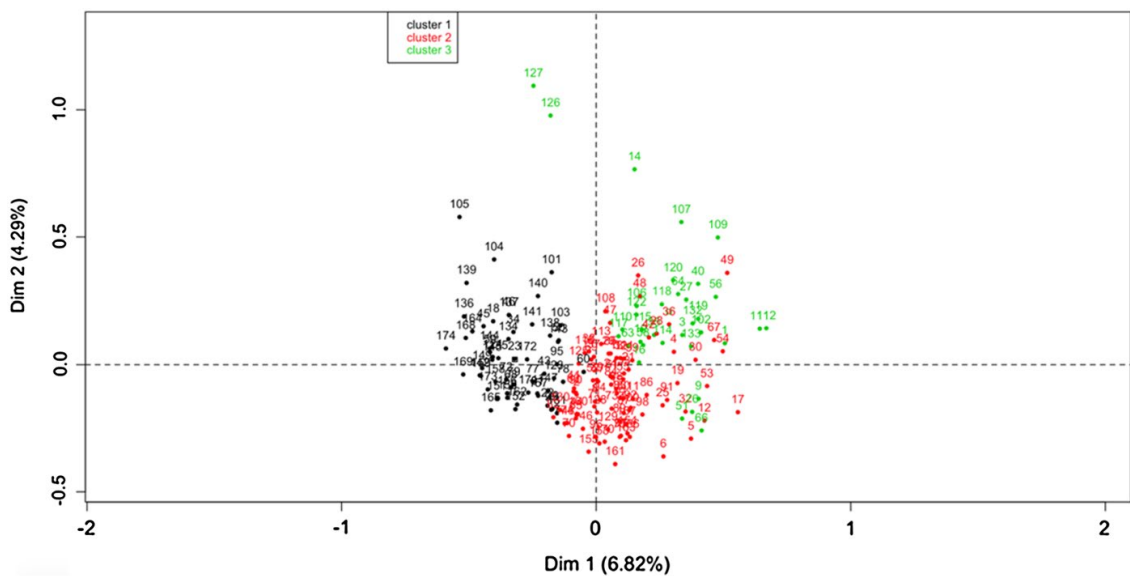


Fig. 9 Factor map and clusters after consolidation with k-means performed on the 174 empirical publications on the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT in R 3.3.2

drawn by Jodelet's 1991 study on madness, as it focuses on societal reflections of inter-group relations, as evidenced in social practices (Wagner et al. 1999).

Cluster 3 represents a line of research distinct from the one revealed by Cluster 2 in *bibliographical aspects* and in respect to *other theories referenced in relation to SRT*, as well as *methodological options*. Bibliographically, Cluster 3 comprises mainly *book chapters* (52.94%), from *Europe* (70.59%), published before the ones in Cluster 2, namely during 1982–1991, in *English and French*. SRT is discussed in relation to three theoretical and disciplinary fields: the one focused on *developmental aspects*, respectively the Piagetian approach and the socio-cultural approach promoted by Vygotsky to intellectual development in children; the dimension of *social cognition*, as evinced by references to mainstream constructs like cognitive schemas, categorization, prototype, behaviour (rather than practices, the term generally employed in SRT), social processes

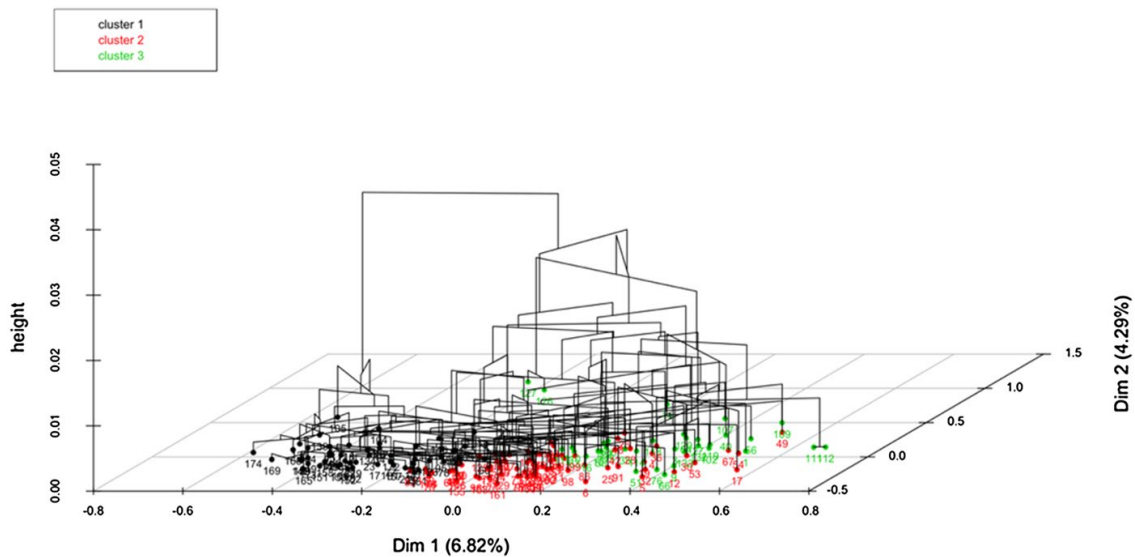


Fig. 10 Factor map, clusters and tree after consolidation with k-means performed on the 174 empirical publications on the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT in R 3.3.2

and schemas, stereotype; the articulation with *Anthropological Theories and Ethnographic Approaches*.

Methodologically, this line of research reveals a preference for quantitative methodologies, *structured instruments* and *quantitative data analysis techniques*, applied on samples made up of *participants pertaining to “real groups”*, that is members of groups formed prior to the research, which share a common history, studied as individuals. In what regards SRT, this cluster is negatively associated to the *transformation of SRs through practices*, emphasizing the *transformation of SRs via emotions* and their *transmission through knowledge*. It also places a focus on how SRs are developed at the social level (*socio-genesis*), thus “opposing” Cluster 2, which emphasized how SRs are developed in social interaction (*micro-genesis*). If we also take into account the thematic area with which Cluster 3 is significantly associated, *Identity*, as well as its paragons (in the order of their proximity to the centroid of the cluster: Ivinson and Duveen 2006; Emiliani and Molinari 1989; Duveen 2013; De Paolis 1990; Emler et al. 1987), it becomes clear that this line of research is focused on the genetic perspective on SRs proposed by Duveen and Lloyd (1990), which has been traditionally related to the ethnographic approach to SRT as de Rosa (2013a) and Jodelet (2008) point out. It is actually Duveen and Lloyd themselves who argued and exemplified in 1993 that ethnography as a method of research in SRT may be complemented with structured instruments, which explains the orientation of our cluster. Moreover, related to the dynamic focus of our approach, it is well represented in Cluster 3 as well, through its referencing the *transformation* and *transmission* of SRs, as well as how they are formed through anchoring and socio-genesis.

In conclusion, while Clusters 2 and 3 capture the core features of the anthropological and ethnographic approaches to SRT, Cluster 1 employs the theory instrumentally, in a general fashion, focused on capturing a social phenomenon in an “a-theoretical” way and this is why it is strongly associated with conference abstracts, rather than book chapters or articles. Moreover, the clear geo-cultural distinction between Clusters 2 (*Latin America*) and 3 (*Europe*), along with the timeframes best represented by each (2002–2011 for the dissemination of the SRT in Latin America and, respectively, 1982–1991 for Europe—an earlier period of the development of the theory), may be due to the fact that SRT has been

very amply proliferated in the Latin American context (de Rosa 2013a, b, 2015b, 2016a, 2019; de Rosa and D'Ambrosio 2008; de Rosa et al. 2017a, b, c, 2018; Jodelet 2011; Wachelke et al. 2015), which could also account for the language differences between the two clusters (Spanish is associated with Cluster 2 and its Latin American context, whereas English and French emerge in the Cluster 3 and are specific to the European publications).

5 Conclusions

Our paper set out to explore how SRT is articulated methodologically with the theoretical premises of the anthropological and ethnographic approach. To this end, we employed a clustering algorithm to highlight the empirical directions which were taken in the scientific publications from our sample. Our findings reveal three empirical research trends represented in three clusters differentiated by theoretical articulations as well as by research methods, in line with the traditional body of research representative for the approach.

The first one refers to a generic way of employing the SRT, a direction which has already been acknowledged by de Rosa when SRT had become very popular in the 80s and it was being referenced and/or applied by researchers with little regard to theoretical, epistemological or methodological aspects concerning its complexity or future development. It was the awareness to this aspect that constituted one of strongest initial motivations to undertake the wide research program aimed at the Meta-theoretical Analysis of the SRT scientific literature; the implicit goal was to promote a deeper understanding of the need to respect the epistemological distinctiveness of SRT in its operationalization in empirical studies inspired by it, especially in juxtaposition with other orientations (e.g. behaviourist, social cognition or discursive theories) (de Rosa 1990a, b, 1992, 2006, 2013a). According to these latest findings, the emergence of the Latin American geo-cultural scenario as the most prolific research arena in SRT has shifted the focus from conceptual development to applied research on social objects characterized by high social demand (de Rosa 2013b, 2015b, 2016a, 2019; de Rosa and D'Ambrosio 2008; de Rosa et al. 2018). The fact that the anthropological approach employs qualitative methods provides the researcher with the possibility to tailor the methodology they find suitable to employ to the specific historical, social and cultural characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation, generating results that are of great relevance to the explored communities and social groups.

The second direction of empirical research, which groups together almost half of our corpus and could thus be considered the most representative for the anthropological and ethnographic approaches, is focused on studying the *transformation* of SRs through practices by employing methods specific to *ethnographies* in mostly field studies.

Finally, the third direction of research and the narrowest one is focused on research within the *socio-genetic perspective*, a current initiated by Duveen and Lloyd (1986), which deals mainly with the connection between SRs and identity within the intellectual development of the child; methodologically, this line of research is different from the one found in Cluster 2 via the use of *more structured instruments*, as welcomed by Duveen and Lloyd (1993), when they pointed out that much can be gained from employing motivated ethnography. This method could lead to the development of psychological instruments (e.g. questionnaires, scales) and thus provide insight into the role played by the individuals in the transformation of SRs.

In conclusion, our results show that the anthropological and ethnographic approaches have kept close to the epistemological claims and traditions set out by Jodelet (1989a,

b) and Duveen and Lloyd (1993) both theoretically, as they are focused on studying the dynamic aspects of SRs such as their genesis and transformation, and methodologically, by employing instruments and techniques specific to both social psychological and anthropological disciplines. In what regards the contribution of this approach to SRT, we have found that it adds the transdisciplinary quality much needed in socio-psychological research by providing a coherent manner of conceptual and empirical integration.

Our research is not without limitations. Thus, pertaining to the sample used, as we already mentioned, it was extracted from the *So.Re.Com "A.S. de Rosa" @-library* (de Rosa 2015a, b, 2017), which since 1994 is subject to continuous technological improvements, to expansion in terms of the documentation filed in the repositories and to the updating of the research tools. It was further enriched during the timeframe (2013–2017) of the *SoReCom Joint-IDP* program (aimed at the research training “by” and “for” research), the current paper being one of the scientific outcomes of the project, and it currently continues to be updated, having retrieved an impressive wealth of data which certifies it as the most comprehensive @-library worldwide specialized in Social Representations, having included in 2016 alone over 70% of all the sources available in three academic social networks (de Rosa 2015b, 2017; de Rosa et al. 2016, 2017a, b, c).

However, some restrictions in accessing publications, especially when it comes to older sources no longer made available by the publishing houses or not retrieved in the physical libraries of consulted universities may have prevented us from finding all the relevant sources for the current analyses. Also, as we previously mentioned while discussing the results of the Cluster 1, many of the conference presentations were available in abstract form only, which may have influenced our results. We should however note that this type of study represents a baseline for further empirical investigations to be historically compared over time. We are confident that our research may contribute to the future developments of SRT by shedding light on the artificial practice of choosing methods according to *trend* or fashion in research practices. Rather, they should be chosen according to epistemological concerns for SRT, its different theoretical dimensions, constructs and paradigmatic approaches orienting the research designs, as proposed, for example, by the modeling approach, which aims at overcoming the traditional quantitative-qualitative dichotomy for the purpose of developing innovative and socially relevant research (de Rosa 2013a, b, 2014).

Acknowledgements This article was part of a wider European Commission-funded project [Grant Agreement PITN-GA-2013-607279 - So.Re.Com. Joint-IDP, ITN-People MSCA-IDP 2013, No. 6072799].

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