Papers on Social Representations - Editorial 2001

The Editors

As indicated by a large number of events and initiatives, social representations research is well alive at the beginning of this new decade. Up to this day, each of the five international conferences, in Ravello (1992, Italy), Rio (1994, Brazil), Aix-en-Provence (1996, France), Mexico City (1998, Mexico) and most recently Montreal (2000, Quebec, Canada) has attracted several hundred researchers from around the globe presenting their work. The number of published articles that invoke Social representations in the title or in the abstract has witnessed a constant increase during the last ten years. According to the PsycInfo database, between 16 and 52 papers and book chapters have been published every year on social representations. This is, of course, a crude and imperfect way of measuring the activity in our field, but it nevertheless illustrates the "good health" of the theory and its applications. New technologies, Health, Education, Democracy and Citizenship are among the most extensively studied domains during the last decade, but new insights have also been gained on the transformation of expert knowledge, on the structure of representations, and on the links between representations and action, to quote but a few of the key domains of our field. Furthermore, under the supervision of Anna-Maria De Rosa, graduate programs on social representations have been developed in various European countries, a new journal, "Psychologie et Société", co-ordinated by Jean-Claude Abric, has been established, and since 1990 the Social Representations Communication Network is organised by Wolfgang Wagner, which is available on the web (http://www.swp.uni-linz.ac.at/srnet.htm). We have to underline also the spectacular growth of the works in Latin America, where researchers have renewed the use of social representations for analysing and solving social problems. Furthermore, social representations theory has begun to appear in the scientific space in the U.S.A. thanks to the tenacity of Gina Philogène.

PSR has changed

Among all these initiatives, "Papers on Social Representations" has also contributed, since 1992, to the spread of ideas and the diffusion of new and imaginative works in the wider context of social representation theory. Initially mainly intended as a forum of discussion among researchers in the field of social representations, it has grown over the years into a fully-fledged scientific journal that has attracted many original contributions. Yet, the journal recently had to face serious challenges, as its policy was since the beginning to keep it as

accessible as possible, especially for students. Indeed, for over six years it has been distributed free of charge to the members of the Social representations network, supported mainly by Wolfgang Wagner's home institution, the Johannes-Kepler-University of Linz in Austria and by contributions from the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. This solution was no longer practicable, and therefore the editorial board recently decided, in order to maintain its accessibility policy, to continue the publication of the journal through electronic diffusion. Thus, Papers on Social representations has been transformed to become a web-based online journal. Keeping its peer-reviewed character, the Papers are now again available free of charge for everybody. Its web-page offers free download for old as well as newly appearing articles in .pdf format.

Another change concerns the composition of the Editorial board. The co-ordinating editor is Alain Clémence to whom manuscripts should be sent. The other members of the editorial board include Gerard Duveen, Uwe Flick, Sandra Jovchelovitch, Michel Rouquette and Wolfgang Wagner. The Editorial board has decided to honour Georges Gaskell for his contribution to the survival of Papers on Social representations by offering him a place in the scientific board, much more adequate for his stature and position. Christian Staerklé has accepted to replace him. The Editorial board is also actively looking for a representative from Latin America.

These different changes in journal organisation have provoked some disturbances in the management of the papers, in particular in the reviewing process. As a result, unacceptable delays in the expertise of papers have occurred and, consequently, a dramatic drop of published papers. Now, the situation is getting better and we still promise to accelerate the examination of the submitted papers!

Editorial policy: debating social representations

The editors would like to take the opportunity to reiterate some claims that have already been made in the two previous editorials, and also add some newer elements. PSR will continue to publish theoretical and empirical papers on social representations, and encourage a broad vision of social representations that situates our approach at the interface between the individual, the group and the culture. As communication and debate are an important part of the theory itself, there is certainly space for competing approaches and discussions around the meaning and status of social representations. Although the orientation of the papers is expected to be centred around social representations, work from other theoretical currents will also be considered to the extent that these approaches address issues of shared knowledge, normative thinking, narrative reasoning, ideological processes in social judgements and communication processes. Possible contributions could come, for example, from social constructionism, social discourse, and cultural psychology, but also from more traditional social psychological, anthropological or sociological domains such as social identity or intergroup processes. Studies of social problems, including interventions in social settings, are also encouraged to be submitted to the journal. This form of research is fundamental to ensure the pertinence and the vividness of the theory.

In the same vein, the editors encourage methodological eclecticism, as it should be clear by now that no single method is most suitable in the study of social representations. Rather, the object and scope of the study should guide the choice of the method.

The journal is therefore open to various approaches to social representations, while aiming at the same time at coherence in regard to scientific quality of the published papers. We feel that one shortcoming of social representational research is that it is not sufficiently " accumulative" in the sense that it is often difficult for authors to build their new work upon

previously published material. In the long run, therefore, a more coherent body of scientific knowledge that can be transposed onto different contexts or domains seems to be a desirable objective in order to guarantee the development of our discipline.

A crucial issue in this regard concerns the investigations of representational content. Content is, no doubt, of paramount importance in the study of social representations, because meaning is primarily revealed through the analysis of content. Yet, descriptions of content as such (as elicited i.e. by open-ended questions) should not be considered as being necessarily indicators, manifestations or elements of social representations. Such approaches can be usefully completed with analyses of various social and cognitive processes, related to domains of investigation such as stereotyping and prejudice, categorisation, attitudes, intergroup relations, social influence, social justice to list but the most thoroughly studied domains. Historical considerations and analyses are also welcomed, as the change and development of representations has not received the attention they deserve. Finally, also the communication and transformation of knowledge remains unfortunately somewhat under-investigated, especially when one considers the importance of these issues for the theory.

Taken together, these different possible avenues for future research has a common denominator: they all point towards the importance of studying topics that are socially and politically relevant in a given context. Numerous studies have indeed shown that social representations are a valuable conceptual tool to study issues that are object of social debate, either on a global or national level, or in more local and specific contexts. By considering social representations as specific knowledge structures guiding behaviour and meaning-giving strategies on the one hand, and as devices to rationalise and justify social realities, and sometimes also to conceal and mask them, on the other, we can work towards a more complete understanding of the processes involved in social representations. As social scientists, we have at our disposal a powerful theory that allows us to understand social processes, and engage in social debate.