Editorial: 50 Years of Research on Social Representations: Central Debates and Challenging Questions.

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To mark 50 years of research on social representations (SR), we planned both a special issue and a conference to bring together some of the most significant papers from the last 50 years. We are delighted to present the main trends of this special issue in this editorial, and are also extremely happy with the level of thought and debate it has produced. In launching the call for the special issue, rather than reduce this celebration of the 50 years of SR to an obsessive trend towards bibliometrics and impact factors, we felt it would be more informative and thought-provoking to have a collection of papers nominated by those who use them - researchers, teachers, peers, students - as the most debated, insightful, illustrative or valuable for them in their research and teaching. This issue brings together the best of these commentaries, together with the original papers chosen in those commentaries as the most significant and, in some cases, further commentary from the original authors. Hence a defining feature of this special issue was dialogue – dialogue not only between older and newer texts and protagonists in SR, but also between teachers and students, and between researchers with different perspectives, working in different contexts with different methods and politics of research and with different intervention needs and different goals for the future

of SR. Dialogue was also a significance feature of the conference which launched this special issue (see:

> http://www2.lse.ac.uk/socialPsychology/news_and_events/2012/psr_march/Intro.aspx).

Consequently, the debates, particularly at the conference, were impassioned, vital and thoroughly enjoyable! In our editorial, we shall flag up some of the central issues that emerge from this collection of selected papers and commentaries, as well as from the conference debates. These loosely relate to three interconnected points:

1. Thinking
2. Doing
3. Engaging

We will take them in order.

1. <u>Thinking with the SR approach; Thinking across the social sciences</u>

The study of social thinking, social knowledge and social representation has developed extensively in the last years into a great diversity of social psychological approaches, reflecting competing interests, varied aspirations and different approaches, albeit with compatible affinities. We can see this diversity within our special issue itself: papers range from the careful investigation of the structure of representations (Chartier & Meunier, 2011; Lahlou, 2011) to the analysis of the complexity of standpoints and social relations they imply (Lamy, Liu, & Ward, 2011), and include also the examination of their linguistic, discursive and dialogical, as well as cultural, anthropological and political dimensions (Jodelet, 2011; de Alba, 2011; Markova, 2011). Nonetheless, many points of convergence are also apparent in the papers, and were visible in the conference discussions, and this is undeniably promising. One of our main ambitions for the special issue and also the conference was to foster a renewed commitment to a space for reflection, where theoretical and methodological assumptions could be questioned, debated and developed from the perspectives of our epistemological history(ies).

In a general sense, the special issue, the conference and the recent trends in numerous publications (Eicher, Emery, Maridor, Gilles, & Bangerter, 2011) suggest that there is room for both innovation and a more *interpretative* use of SRT, as well as a scholarly re-emphasis on the foundations of the theory, and so a more *explicative* utilization of SR. Be aware, however, that there may be a trap waiting for us here. Using a similar framework to the

interpretative-explicative classical distinction, Werner Heisenberg made the distinction between *static* and *dynamic* theories. The first are *explicative,* using clear concepts without ambiguity, calling on strict rules, applying to precise fragments of reality. However, they are in danger of "generating hollow shells" / forms empty of contents. The second are *interpretative*; their concepts are more fertile than precise, aiming at capturing variations between regions and realities, relations between objects. Every attempt to speak about reality generally comprises static and dynamic entities" (2003, p.21). Hence, there are actually two traps that may await researchers: either "generating a form empty of contents" for the former, or "become vague and incomprehensible" for the latter (op. cit).

Even though the radically dynamic nature of social representations is often emphasized, we have to beware of a certain 'impressionist' use the theory may suffer While guarding against dogmatism, it is important to preserve the heuristic force of SR (i.e., the dynamic approach to social knowledge, Jesuino, 2011) evident in the dialogical, cultural and anthropological dimensions of representations, as well as in the investigation of the structure of representations and the variation in standpoints. Conversely, guarding against superfluous mystification, we think that it is precisely with an open perspective of SR, through retrospective, comparative, historical but also current, interdisciplinary and critical discussion (Jodelet, 2011), that we can succeed in applying innovative forces. This will encourage both an open approach (open to innovation within SR and open to social psychology and other social sciences) as well as a precise use of SR in examining current social debates (such as those about the economy, social movements, health inequalities and so forth).

This simultaneous opening-up of ideas through a re-examination of historical premises and a re-connection to them, through current concerns, may put us closer to a somewhat ideal model of an open discipline studying how and why we seek to understand and act in the *here and now*, a model that is in other words, a way to develop an *anthropology of our culture* (cf. Moscovici, 2012).

2. <u>"Doing" social representations: researching, teaching and studying SR</u>

A very clear trend that emerges from the collection of papers brought together in this issue is the concern with the 'doing' of social representations, understood in a broad sense. Several of the papers and chapters in the issue were explicitly selected and discussed because of their usefulness in explicating how 'to do' SR – i.e., how to learn, to research, and to teach

social representations. These papers were seen to be helpful for advancing knowledge, reflection and practice in three broad and intertwined points:

(1) how to situate the approach of SR with regard to other social psychological approaches and their assumptions;

(2) what are the fields of inquiry that can and should be examined with the approach of SR;

(3) how to relate research design and research practicalities with the more specific epistemological assumptions of SR.

The first point concerns the impact of our disciplinary identity and intra/inter-disciplinary relations, the second focuses on inter-connections between internal assumptions and external projects, and the third is about internal consistency. The three points can be detected in the papers by (in alphabetic order) Belton, 2011; Bertoldo, Bousfield, Justo, & Wachelke, 2011; Cakaric, 2011; Carugati & Selleri, 2011; Chartier & Meunier, 2011; Clémence, 2011; de Alba, 2011; Eicher et al., 2011; Foster, 2011; Jovchelovitch, 2011; Lahlou & Abric, 2011; Provencher, 2011; Wagner, 2011.

With respect to the first point - identity and intra/inter-disciplinary relations – the papers make several points about the broader scientific community of reference for SR; for instance, the fact that the epistemological assumptions of SR call for a non-individualistic approach to research (Cakaric, 2011; Jovchelovitch, 2011; Wagner, 2011; Foster, 2011), and that this can namely mean putting the psychological laboratory and experiments in their proper place as locus of representationally guided meaning making (Jovchelovitch, 2011). Other papers point out that for SR to thrive as a social psychological approach it needs to pay attention to what its place within social psychology is and how this place is constantly re-defined in time and (geographical) place by internal and external forces and developments (Bertoldo et al., 2011; Sen, 2011); among these forces, constantly re-shaping the relative places of theories and approaches within social psychology, is the hegemony of English as publishing language, a force that until now has not prevented SR papers from being published in French, Portuguese and Spanish (Eicher et al., 2011). In some papers this also means attempting to and clarifying – in time and location - what are the more and less promising theoretical partnerships of SR within the discipline (Bertoldo et al., 2011; Wagner, 2011), and where are they being developed.

In the conference, the practical implications of this point - how to situate the approach of SR with regard to other social psychological approaches - were also debated, since

reflecting on the location and partnerships of SR research determines what options are open to future generations of researchers and students. The location and partnerships of SR research then determines, in this sense, future options, such as where to go for post docs, for jobs, who to connect to, how, where and with whom to publish and develop research. These are important issues for the future of SR research.

Regarding the second point - inter-connections between internal assumptions and external research projects - the papers of this special issue also highlight the need to broaden the questions we ask and to look at fields of inquiry that have hitherto been somehow neglected (Wagner). During the conference this theme was again brought up, and themes and problems that SR has already started to touch - interpersonal and intergroup relationships, immigration (Howarth), religion (Sen), poverty (Arruda), politics and ecological movements (Castro), economics, capitalism - were deemed compatible with the SR approach.

Regarding the third point - internal consistency – concerns like the practice of doing research, teaching SR research and methodological issues and helping students complete PhD theses are very present in the already mentioned papers. By commenting on previous SR studies conducted in the health domain (Belton, 2011; Provencher, 2011; Clémence, 2011), or about science and technology (Foster, 2011) or the environment (de Alba, 2011), or education (Carugati & Selleri, 2011), many of the authors of this special issue highlight how helpful these studies were for clarifying the match between SR assumptions and methods, by showing how to put methods to practice and guiding intervention. Many authors of this special issue explicitly report that the studies they selected were important both for their work as researchers and as teachers. In this way, they highlight their committed concern with the transmission and rigorous development of SR thought, knowledge and reflection through teaching. This refreshingly reminds us of a fact not always sufficiently emphasized: the fact that our work as academics has an impact measurable not only by publication and impact factor scores. It also has an influence on the students who will not remain in academia, but will advance their careers in many different institutions and communities and can make a difference in society from there. This fact gives SR a real impact in real life which needs to be acknowledged and cherished. If we want to increase this impact, we ought to keep publishing not just research papers in journals, but also scholarly and decidedly pedagogical texts and handbooks, 'readable' texts for practitioners and newcomers in the field. And we need to do this in ways that inspire social psychological imagination (Provencher, 2011), a sense of

excitement (Wagner, 2011) and capture audiences beyond English through the publication and translation of SR work in languages other than English only (Bertoldo et al., 2011)[1].

The conference debates on these issues were followed by two suggestions: 1. to pay more attention to the context of knowledge (Doise); 2. to combine a variety of methods: returning to field experiments and developing new experimental procedures compatible with the non-individualistic assumptions of the SR approach (Castro), yet considering situated knowledge, embedded in everyday life, using new observational means, like video (Lahlou), or new technologies (Bauer), and attempting to "live" and feel the dynamics of social life (Sen) and conveying it accordingly.

3.   <u>Social representations and engaging: challenges for publishing</u>

Social representations theory is all about dialogue, the exchange of knowledge and hence engaging with others. Perhaps this helps explain how the theory has successfully travelled across diverse cultural contexts (see Vala, 2011) and has attracted researchers and practitioners beyond social psychology, for example: technology, health, environmental or political science. Indeed, as a perspective that explicitly rejects individualising psychological and common-place assumptions about the psychological subject and its (lack of) relationship to the social context, history and ideology (Markova, 2011), we have clearly gained ground and diverse audiences around the world (with papers in this issue from Austria, Germany, Switzerland to Mexico, Brazil, Malta, New Zealand and India). Despite this we should not lose our critical voice, as Xenia Chryssochoou asserted, or a sense of what is distinctive and valuable about the SR perspective. Echoing section one above (*Thinking within the SR approach; Thinking across the social sciences*) we need to be explicative and have clear concepts rigorously defined and taught, *while* being interpretive and finding points of connection and engagement. This is a question of borders and identities, just as we see in the social world: we do not want a cultish and fanatic fundamentalism of what defines SR research in a way that prohibits development, innovation, critique or creativity; we do not want a relaxed and all-embracing relativism where we see all research as variations of SR theory. Clearly, there is a need to "explicitly differentiate SRT from other social psychological theories and highlight its unique added value as a research tool for understanding societal dynamics" (Eicher, et al 2011). But as Alain Clémence points out

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[1] In recognition of this and as a development of the conference, PSR has launched a new initiative to encourage the translation and commentary of texts other than English. See website for full details.

(2011) perhaps we don't always need the 'label' of SR. In a thought-proving paper delivered at the conference (*Is there a Future in SR-Guided Research? Memories of the Future, see:*

http://www2.lse.ac.uk/socialPsychology/news_and_events/2012/psr_march/day-2-session-2.aspx) Wolfgang Wagner agrees, promoting a 'chilli sauce' model of engagement and collaboration that balances maintaining the essence of SR in such a way not to stifle debate and elaboration.[2]

In the special issue, besides engagement with others beyond the SR community, we see that there is a desire to engage more explicitly with each other and read each other's works more carefully, as Carugati and Sellerni (2011), and Lamy et al. (2011) all point out. We are active in many different domains (health, social identities and intergroup relations, public understanding of science, human rights, intelligence, education, environment and law) using a variety of languages: English, French, Portuguese, Spanish and others (Eicher et al., 2011). We need to continue developing strategies for communication between these different fields (as we can see in Belton's paper, 2011, that bridges health and social identity work) and create more opportunities for translation (see footnote 1, above).

Engaging across and within the SR communities may provoke a sharper sense of the original and distinctive feature of the theory and the different ways in which it is taken up and developed. Wolfgang Wagner urged against the trend to produce more and more purely descriptive studies of social representations of x, y and z. Concurring with Jovchelovitch (2011), Markova (2011) and de Rosa (2011), he seeks to develop a rigorous use of SR *concepts* in research, particularly a more sophisticated understanding of the role of social context, social relations and social interaction in shaping meaning-making (as we see in Breakwell, 2011). We have to provide and promote space for both, the explicative and the development of precise concepts, as well as for interpretative and creative connections between the social sciences, policy makers and practitioners.

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[2] One of the central figures in SR at the LSE (who was unable to attend the conference due to ill health) would have applauded this spirit of debate and openness alongside an emphasis on history: Professor Rob Farr. Rob did much to disseminate SR in the English-speaking world and was always promoting opportunities for students and younger colleagues to enter into debates and critiques, while urging them to read more of the history of our discipline. Hence, it was an opportune moment to reveal an original portrait of Rob Farr, created by Patrick Bremer (www.patrickbremer.co.uk) and unveiled by Professor George Gaskell, see http://www2.lse.ac.uk/socialPsychology/news_and_events/2012/psr_march/day-1-Session-7.aspx.

What next? How to re-socialise Social Psychology

We see that SR has clearly made headway in resisting the de-socialising of Social Psychology and in becoming an anthropology of contemporary culture. We have seen that we need to be pragmatic and creative in thinking about 'what next' and agreeing strategies for advancing SR research: there is no royal road as different contexts and different problems will require different solutions. However, by way of conclusion, we suggest that in order to support our field and look forward to *another* productive and valuable 50 years of SR research we need to:

- Know our history: emphasising both the importance of rigorous understanding of past scholarship and the fostering of openness to internal and external critique and innovation. This requires knowing our history both in terms of SR work as well as in terms of social psychology as a whole

- Promote the material, social and psychological conditions for dialogue, collaboration and translation across the diverse contexts and hierarchies in which we work

- Highlight the role of education and teaching as a means of socialising future generations into 'different' ways of understanding social psychology, the production of knowledge and its interconnection with hegemony, resistance and the possibilities for more democratic forms of knowledge and communication.

such an important task in producing a high-quality journal that particular thanks are extended to those named below. Finally, the authors of these papers who were also the conference delegates made both the special issue and the conference an enormous success – with their dedication to the field, commitment to their own perspectives on SR and willingness to listen and engage with others.

List of reviewers from 2011 to 2012

Matthew Adams	Nick Hopkins
Thémis Apostolidis	Caroline Howarth
Angela Arruda	Irini Kadianaki
Guida de Abreu	Nikos Kalampalikis
Martha de Alba	Nicole Kronberger
Jean-Claude Abric	Saadi Lahlou
Susana Batel	Mary Anne Lauri
Martin Bauer	James Liu
Glynis Breakwell	Gina Philogene
Paula Castro	Marie Préau
Alain Clémence	Ivana Marková
Flora Cornish	Fathali Moghaddam
Paul Daanen	Carla Mouro
Willem Doise	Charis Psaltis
Emmilie Eveling	Claudine Provencher
Uwe Flick	Seamus Power
Juliet Foster	Mohammad Sartawi
Alex Gillespie	Ragini Sen
Jorge Correia Jesuino	Clifford Stevenson
Denise Jodelet	Jorge Vala
Helene Joffe	Joaquim Pires Valentim
Sandra Jovchelovitch	Wolfgang Wagner
Valérie Haas	Lisa Whittaker
Peter Holtz	Tania Zittoun

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