

## **A Brazilian Way of Looking at the Aix Social Representations School of Thought**

CELSO PERIERA DE SÁ<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

### **ABSTRACT**

The writing that follows describes how a Brazilian social psychologist became familiar with the Aix school of thought, and relates his personal assessment of the part it played in the growth of social representations' field of study. Among the contributions the Aix school made to that field, the most remarkable are deemed to be: its complementary nature with general theory, its experimental spirit, its refinement of the core nucleus hypothesis into the structural approach, the social basis of representations' core and peripheral cognitive elements, the explicit relations between them and social practices; as well as later developments, a representation's 'hidden zone' for instance. Finally, considerations of the influence Jean-Claude Abric and his colleagues exerted on social psychology in Brazil will be discussed.

*Keywords: social representations, Aix school of thought, structural approach*

This special issue of *Papers on Social Representations*, that pays tribute to Jean-Claude Abric, is a unique opportunity – to which I have the honor of contributing – of making a retrospective analysis of the academic work he handed down to us. In reality, the contribution made by Jean

Claude Abric to social psychology and, specifically, to the study of social representations doesn't end with Jean-Claude's personal production, but goes well beyond. It also includes the part he played in creating, strengthening and maintaining the continuous *leadership* of a scientific school of thought.

Born in Aix-en-Provence, Abric's school of thought progressively extended its influence to other regions in France and Europe, going across the Mediterranean and the Ocean, to finally reach Brazil in the beginning of the 90's. Since I was part of the group that welcomed this movement and since I also participated in the exchange of idea within this group over the past twenty years, my contribution to this editorial initiative reflects a view of the Aix School from a Brazilian social psychologist's perspective

My presentation has two parts. In the first one, I will comment on the circumstances of my personal commitment to the Aix School and the scope of my academic investment in the core nucleus theory. In the second part, I will assess the structural approach's role in the field of social representations as I understood it, as well as its impact on Brazilian studies and research that have been developed ever since.

## **FIRST PART – MEETING THE AIX SCHOOL**

The first time I went to Aix-en-Provence, with the help of Denise Jodelet, was in 1992, when I had the opportunity to personally meet three of the Aix school first generation authors: Jean-Claude Abric, Claude Flament et Pierre Vergès.

The year after, Jean-Claude Abric came to Rio de Janeiro, as a Visiting Professor for a month, during which our exchanges mutually and jointly broadened our perspectives: mine, for I had access to more detailed information about the building of core nucleus theory, Jean-Claude's because he went to become familiar with Brazilian culture – having attended an African-brazilian religious ritual and a soccer game at the notorious Maracanã stadium – and with social issues that were of main interest to Brazilian researchers; and we, from both sides, were even gifted with the birth of a sincere and strong friendship.

In 1994, the whole Aix team - Jean-Claude Abric, Christian Guimelli, Pierre Vergès, Michel Morin, Pascal Moliner, which unfortunately lacked Claude Flament – went to Rio de

Janeiro, to attend the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Convention on Social Representations, that we were honoured to have organized and hosted.

In 1995, I applied for a teaching position as associate professor at the Rio de Janeiro State University, by defending a thesis on this topic. Once approved, the thesis was published as a book in 1996, entitled *Núcleo Central das Representações Sociais* (Core Nucleus of Social Representations), including a voluminous preface written by Jean-Claude. That said, barely two years after the simultaneous publication of collective works organized by Abric (1994a) and Guimelli (1994) – which, in my opinion, were a turning point in the spread of the structural approach in France – was this perspective also introduced to Brazil.

In 1996, I had the broadening experience of spending four months at the University of Provence for a Postdoctoral internship, and had the privilege of exchanges with Abric, Flament and Vergès, and to benefit from enlightening discussions with Guimelli and Moliner. For this occasion, the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on Social Representations that took place in Aix-en-Provence marked, in my view, an irrevocable stepping of the Aix School into the common fated community of social representations social psychologists.

In 1998, the city of Natal, northeast Brazil, hosted the first *Jornadas Internacionais sobre Representações Sociais* (International Social Representations Days), of which seven followed in Brazil and one in Argentina. This first International Day, a historical event, benefited from Serge Moscovici's and a dozen important European social representations researchers' presence. Unfortunately, it went on without the expected attendance of Jean-Claude, which was the reason why I had the difficult task of replacing him during a conference on the structural approach. From then on, I like to think I acquired a sort of full citizenship – or at least kinship – to the Aix School.

## **SECOND PART – CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE AIX SCHOOL OF THOUGHT**

My book, *Core Nucleus of Social Representations*, which introduced Brazil to the structural approach, has embodied, for sure, more than a work of scientific propagation. Written as a formal thesis for institutional approval, the text couldn't limit itself to being a replication of the assumptions, concepts and proposals that were related to the theoretical construction in question. Additionally, it had to include a critical assessment of the Aix project and also to provide it with a

convincing presentation of its academic excellence among the community of Brazilian social psychologists.

Once the thesis was approved by a competent and thorough jury and the book published, and since I never heard of any concerns regarding the exactness and relevance of its content throughout the fifteen years that went by, I now regard this exercise of diffusing the core nucleus theory as a significant contribution, of high impact among the development of modern social psychology, and as a success.

Consequently, I allow myself to now present the same arguments I presented back then, to which I will add some thoughts that came to me later on, and information I didn't possess at the time.

So, it is a question of emphasizing some essential aspects of the Aix School's production, which assimilation to the field of social representations lead to its theoretical, conceptual and methodological expansion. More specifically, my assessment was, and still is, that, without the core nucleus theory and its subsequent "refining" in terms of the structural approach, the field of social representations would be less remarkable than it is today in social psychology.

### **The Complementary Nature**

The first feature to emphasise is Abric's persistence to maintain – which, by the way, he did in my book's preface – that the structural approach is a complementary perspective to the general theory of social representations, and not a so-called alternative to it. In this way, the Aix school combines itself to other complementary perspectives – the Paris School (if Denise Jodelet allows me to label it as such) and the Geneva School – which also grew out from the 'Moscovician' matrix of social representations, itself being a "grand theory" according to the inspired definition of Willem Doise (1993). Of course, these academic stances allowed for maintaining the field of investigation's totality, without limiting everyone's contribution to its expansion.

Since then, deriving core nucleus theory from the general theory of social representations – of complementary nature, as Abric wanted – has increased the explanatory power of the whole, depending on the novel type of acquired data and obtained results in these research. Yet, such results kept being interpreted as constructed social representations that are mobilized in everyday life.

Unlike this kind of development, is the noticed proliferation, in US social psychology, of “micro-theories” – the most renowned being Leon Festinger’s cognitive dissonance – which are also often derived from “grand theories” like Fritz Heider’s (1958). Their derivation – that one might label of “supplementary” nature – seems to produce perspectives of such a high level of academic productivity, of theoretical and conceptual autonomy that it renders them free from the original matrix.

### **The Experimental Spirit**

The “supplementary” derivation in US theories is usually attributed to the practice of experimental research, stemming from a belief – introduced by Kurt Lewin it is said, and largely endorsed by others – according to which social psychology should grow out from specific theoretical constructions followed by experimental testing. The “complementary” aspect the Aix School offers to the field of social representations is also of experimental essence. Nevertheless, while in the first case what is added to the existing knowledge is nearly always “a bit more of the same”, in the second, the added component was a novel and different contribution, not only in regards to other social representation studies that were conducted, but also with respect to the collective practice among social psychological laboratory research. According to Rob Farr (1984), this second difference means that the global culture in which experimental subjects are embedded started to be treated as an independent variable – like, for instance, the social representations of “man” and “machine” in Abric’s first experiment (1984) – instead of being suppressed, or controlled for, as strange and undesirable variables.

To me, the Aix School has introduced not only an already established methodology in the field of social representations, but, even more, it added what one may call an “experimental spirit” to it. As suggested by Abric (1994b), social representations research cannot do without discursive data, as interviews; however, it isn’t sure that individuals’ spontaneous discourse reflects a true expression of their representations. Methods that were used to actually consider representations that correspond with the application of this experimental spirit were probably the same Flament (1989) had in mind when he imputed to the structural approach the role of making social representations theory more heuristic and valuable for social practice and research.

### **From Core Nucleus to the Structural Approach**

The departure from a theory about the existence and nature of a core nucleus among social representations to a broader perspective (Abric, 1994c) – which also considers other representational elements and their contributions to the core nucleus – stems from a conceptual and theoretical “refining” process, that first appeared as the evolution of an original idea, an idea that was widespread among a small group of researchers who shared similar critical interests and concerns about the field of social psychology.

Among the experimental culture in which such a group teamed up, Abric’s proposal was strictly considered in its original terms, that is, as a hypothesis. And, as a hypothesis, it has been systematically treated, even tested, expanded, adapted and tested again, besides searching for and verifying possible determining conditions and their implications for social representations research.

The main result drawn from this initial process was the emergence of a systemic structural approach, which went beyond the almost exclusive consideration for the core nucleus, without ever reducing its significance for studying a representation’s state at a given time. From then on, drawing the comparison between representations of the same object that were constructed by various social groups and the transformation of a representation within a group was made by structural analysis.

### **Cognitive Structures**

The proposal of cognitive structures in social representations by the Aix School had the credit of rendering representations’ psychological dimension more explicit. But it opened the door to critiques that regard it as more cognitive than social. It is therefore needed that one specifies which kind of structure it is, and then assesses the existing relation between this structure and the social involved in social representations’ field of study.

I believe that structures, in Jean-Claude Abric’s approach, can be understood in Jean Piaget’s way, to whom is credited the claim that, while psychological structuralism was concerned with “functionless structures” and functionalism with “structureless functions”, his system dealt with both structures and their functions. In fact, the Aix School’s structures of interest – core nucleus and the peripheral system – that would differentiate themselves depending on the absolute or conditional nature of their contents, according to Flament’s Conditional

Property hypothesis (1994b), operate at the same time different and well defined functions in a social representation.

Additionally, in the field of social representations, the social matter that counts resides in the history of the group and its collective memory, from which the core nucleus originates, and contributes to the peripheral system's formation, through the present diversity of populations, including individual experiences. In this way, the cognitive system is not considered autonomous by the Aix School, as hard 'cognitivism' claims, but really relies upon the Social or, at least, deeply ties to it during its development.

### **Social Practices**

Social practices more and more occupy a special place in the field of social representations. The more common view, however, is that practices are the products of representations, in line with the traditional cognitivist formula which postulates that thought precedes action. In a spirit of mediation, it is sometimes admitted that practices and representations influence each other. But we owe Michel-Louis Rouquette – whose demise was a great loss for the Aix School – the concise definition of these different influences. According to Rouquette (1998), social representations are conditions that allow practices while ahead of them; define their relevance and their fit, no doubt an important function, but which doesn't have a determining role. After practices, their potential changes are what play an essential part in the changing of representations.

Though the Aix School does not limit its interest to the genesis of representations, it rather emphasizes the actual changing of representations, the origins of which can be found in the dynamics of contemporary social practices. It is then able to treat in its experimental fashion the impressionist thesis claiming the permanent mutation of representations. The arbitrary character of this claim is then suppressed, being replaced by an identification of factors that trigger the change and determine its course, as empirically demonstrated by Guimelli (1989) and theoretically interpreted by Flament (1994).

### **Further Developments**

In the conclusion of my book (Sá, 1996, p. 168), I wrote:

“The core nucleus approach has always been preoccupied with the accuracy of its concepts, its theoretical propositions and its methodological operations. Vagueness here isn’t justified by an intentional strategy or due to the complexity of the phenomenon, but presumed as a function of real theoretical limitation (until now) in explaining certain facts or even understanding the meaning of some unexpected obviousness.”

At that time already, eagerness to overcome challenges allowed for the production of quite important theoretical and methodological contributions, two of which I would like to stress, for they provide testimony to the sustained actions of the theory’s creator (Abric, 2003, 2005) with the undeniable participation of his colleagues. The first contribution has rendered the structural aspect of the theory more flexible, when the existence of two possible dimensions at the core nucleus level was acknowledged – normative and functional – and their potential activations were subjected to the ‘distance’ between studied group and the object of representation. The second contribution stems from a methodological problem, which is common to social psychological research, to finally introduce a new concept – social representation’s ‘silent zone’ – and a body of experimental techniques to study it. These are, of course, non-negligible contributions to the empirical investigation of social thinking.

### **Aix School’s Expansion to Brazil**

Outside Europe, Brazil has probably been home to the largest growing social representations field of study since the 80’s. In 2009, during the *IV Conferência Brasileira sobre Representações Sociais* (4<sup>th</sup> Brazilian convention on Social Representations), the issue of a ‘Brazilian School’ was raised. The obvious conclusion was that such a thing did not exist, for our research is both guided by general theory and each of its complementary approaches.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to describe a few facts and considerations regarding the structural approach in Brazil, which were introduced during the convention in question, such as the number of translated and published works from Aix School’s authors in Brazilian books, including for instance Abric’s (1998, 2003, 2005), Guimelli’s (2003) and Rouquettes’ (1998, 2003) studies.

As regards the publication of articles in scientific journals and production of PhD theses in the field of social representations, an investigation lead by Wagner and Candido (2009) demonstrated that 20% of them displayed, between 1998 and 2008, the structural approach as their explicit theoretical framework. It is indeed a small rate, but one has to keep in mind the analysis included not only the general theory and its two complementary approaches, but also conceptual approximations unrelated to Moscovici's work. Another interesting result showed a prevalence of health and educational related fields in the use of structural analysis, which happens especially because of its application to the study of concrete social issues and the search for practical solutions.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

This personal testimony must be concluded with an honest confession: though I tried to keep track of the Aix School's recent developments, I am in no position to talk about the contribution of its second-generation researchers. If the first generation was not concentrated in Aix-en-Provence, but also acted in Montpellier and even Paris, the second one seems to be present in an even higher number of facilities and French academic courses. And one can already foresee the birth of a third generation, not only in France and in Europe, but also in other regions such as North Africa and Latin America. This kind of "diaspora" makes it harder to specify the current state of the structural approach, but is itself indicative of the permanent development of theoretical, methodological and conceptual contributions of the Aix School within social representations research. Furthermore, it seems possible to observe an increasing use of such contributions, together with other approaches within the social psychology of thought, knowledge and memory.

We therefore wish to support these second and third generations of researchers – may they be in Aix, Montpellier, Nîmes, Paris, Tunis or Rio de Janeiro – and we acknowledge their commitment to guaranteeing the perpetuation and expansion of the perspective initiated by Jean-Claude Abric, the features of which, complementary to the general theory of representations, are becoming more and more relevant, productive and fore sighting.

**REFERENCES**

- Abric, J.-C. (1984). A theoretical and experimental approach to the study of social representations in a situation of interaction. In R. M. Farr, & S. Moscovici (Eds.), *Social representations* (pp. 169-183). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Abric, J.-C. (1994a). *Pratiques sociales et représentations*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Abric, J.-C. (1994b). Méthodologie de recueil des représentations sociales. In J.-C. Abric (Ed.), *Pratiques sociales et représentations* (pp. 59-82). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Abric, J.-C. (1994c). Les représentations sociales: aspects théoriques. In J.-C. Abric (Ed.), *Pratiques sociales et représentations* (pp. 11-35). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Abric, J.-C. (1998). A abordagem estrutural das representações sociais. In A. S. P. Moreira, & D. C. Oliveira (Eds.), *Estudos interdisciplinares de representação social* (pp. 27-36). Goiânia: AB Editora.
- Abric, J.-C. (2003). Abordagem estrutural das representações sociais: desenvolvimentos recentes. In P. H. F. Campos, & M. C. S. Loureiro (Eds.), *Representações sociais e práticas educativas* (pp. 37-57). Goiânia: Editora da UCG.
- Abric, J.-C. (2005). A zona muda das representações sociais. In D. C. Oliveira, & P. H. F. Campos (Eds.), *Representações sociais: uma teoria sem fronteiras* (pp. 23-34). Rio de Janeiro: Editora Museu da República.
- Doise, W. (1993). Debating social representations. In G. M. Breakwell, & D. V. Canter (Eds.), *Empirical approaches to social representations* (pp. 157-170). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Farr, R. M. (1984). Social representations: their role in the design and execution of laboratory experiments. In R. M. Farr, & S. Moscovici (Eds.), *Social representations* (pp. 124-147). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Flament, C. (1989). Structure et dynamique des représentations sociales. In D. Jodelet (Ed.), *Les représentations sociales* (pp. 204-219). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Flament, C. (1994a). Structure, dynamique et transformation des représentations sociales. In J.-C. Abric (Ed.), *Pratiques sociales et représentations* (pp. 37-57). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

- Flament, C. (1994b). Aspects périphériques des représentations sociales. In C. Guimelli (Ed.), *Structures et transformations des représentations sociales* (pp. 85-118). Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé.
- Guimelli, C. (1989). Pratiques nouvelles et transformations sans rupture d'une représentation sociale: la représentation de la chasse et de la nature. In J.-L. Beauvois, R.-V. Joule, & J.-M. Monteil (Eds.), *Perspectives cognitives et conduites sociales* (pp. 117-138). Cousset: DelVal.
- Guimelli, C. (1994). *Structures et transformation des représentations sociales*. Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé.
- Guimelli, C. (2003). Transformação das representações sociais, novas práticas e esquemas cognitivos de base. In P. H. F. Campos, & M. C. S. Loureiro (Eds.), *Representações sociais e práticas educativas* (pp. 59-80). Goiânia: Editora da UCG.
- Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley.
- Rouquette, M.-L. (1998). Representações e práticas sociais: alguns elementos teóricos. In A. S. P. Moreira, & D. C. Oliveira (Eds.), *Estudos interdisciplinares de representação social* (pp. 39-46). Goiânia: AB Editora.
- Rouquette, M.-L. (2003). Paradoxos da representação e da ação: conjunções sem coordenação. In P.H.F. Campos, & M. C. S. Loureiro (Eds.), *Representações sociais e práticas educativas* (pp. 81-88). Goiânia: Editora da UCG.
- Rouquette, M.-L. (2005). Sobre uma categoria específica de representações sociais em psicologia política. In D. C. Oliveira, & P. H. F. Campos (Eds.), *Representações sociais: uma teoria sem fronteiras* (pp. 185-190). Rio de Janeiro: Editora Museu da República.
- Sá, C. P. (1996). *Núcleo central das representações sociais*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- Wolter, R. M. C. P., & Cândido, F. (2009). *Compte rendu de recherche*. Rio de Janeiro: UERJ.

CELSONO PEREIRA DE SÁ was a professor of social psychology at the State University of Rio de Janeiro. He is known for his contribution to the development of studies on social representations

in Brazil. His book *The Central Nucleus of Social Representations*, introduced the structural approach of social representations in Brazil.