

Intervening

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ABSTRACT

This contribution is based on my personal and professional experience with Jean-Claude Abric. It aims at presenting the attitude of Jean-Claude Abric as a researcher and as a social psychology practitioner. This contribution will present specifically one aspect of his attitude: Intervention. To Jean-Claude, Intervention is a way of merging the study of concrete and ordinary practices with a global conception of the psyche (social representations).

Keywords: social representations, social psychologist, Intervention, Jean-Claude Abric

The order I will try to deliver through this contribution aims at combining Jean-Claude Abric's attitude as a researcher with the attitude as a practitioner of social psychology he kept until his final moments. In order to do so, I will tap into the depths of my memory without tearing apart the nature of his practice and his attitudes towards it. I'm not quite sure I'll be able to avoid a succession of anecdotes, it is true they will give as many opportunities to bring back our lost friend. I would like to avoid unctuous and eulogistic comments. Nevertheless, I hope to bear truthful testimony of the peculiar way Jean-Claude had of contributing to scientific research.

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THE BIRTH OF A PRACTICE

The title of my contribution: *intervening*, is meant for summing two parts of my upcoming argument: (1) bringing a bit of change between contributions that are basically focused on experimental social psychology in order to characterize Jean-Claude Abric's psycho-social work from a clinical and personal approach and (2) to intervene is a verb we frequently used with a group of friends when, from 1969 on, we created the GIFRESH (Group for Intervention, Education and Research in Humanities).

This action verb was very often pronounced by Jean-Claude, straightaway acknowledged leader of this group, which was build around a principle he dearly held: *'I only work with friends, or whom I work with become my friends'*. A principle completely contrary to more classical orientations such as researchers' impartiality or psychoanalysts' unconditional positive regard. This project is retrospectively feasible if one is willing to admit the utopian part within impartiality, for even the so called 'hard' sciences agreed to acknowledge the researcher's personal contribution in choosing his research objects and interpreting their results. In order to avoid the dangers of tributes other than a fair share of emotion, I will not chalk this decision of juxtaposing affective links to professional ones up to some conscious epistemic and activist process, indeed Jean-Claude might be regarded as one whom first research topics dealt with game and conflict, and how to stand or face conflict: in friendship and in gaming. Needless to say I came up with interpretation only nowadays and ignore if, by entitling his PhD thesis *'games and conflicts'* Jean-Claude – being objective and scientific - was aware of his work's subjective aspect.

We first intervened as a group (at the beginning of the 70's) with institutional direction boards, for instance in a school for social workers and a training organization for industrial executives. We were then frequently called upon to intervene in times of change, crisis, conflicts, reorganization among other things, by various organizations.

When GIFRESH was founded, we were met with fierce animosity by the Academia, and that had at least two effects. A form of solidarity and a care for rigor - observable through the amount of time spent analyzing requests – added to our original friendship. Intervention was first analyzing the request with enquirers and also between us, when friendship went along with vigorous confrontation during long afternoons. Intervention was taking the time to collectively

analyze a request: I wonder if the amount of time spent analyzing together was greater than time spent intervening.

But, as I'm used to saying, to analyze is to intervene. I'm referring to a time when we started practicing together and started practicing at all, so my memories might, like all memories, contain a kernel of fiction. This kind of practice did not last long for sure, at least regarding the collective analysis of requests. I still do it, in some way, as I became a psychoanalyst to whom analyzing is a sustained activity that takes place in a specific group (as Flament emphasized when we studied together): 'a dyad', composed of the analyzed and the analyst. Analyzing one's request then the other's, one's analysis triggering the other's. Those constitute as many different ways of doing practise and research in psychoanalysis, and are rooted in this founding period.

Intervening through research and training is an old age idea that started 10 years before 1969 (the year when GIFRESH was created), when we were studying psychology together in Aix-en-Provence, sitting on the benches of the upper floor of what would later become a law school. Most general psychology and child psychology courses were focused on Piaget's work. This, among other things, brought us closer to research. And this is how four scholarship students from social backgrounds underrepresented in University back then went to Geneva to meet Piaget at his laboratory.

We were able to cross the border (in every sense of the word) thanks to Jean-Claude's old 2HP¹ he could afford after working nightshifts at the Toulon mail-sorting center. I don't remember having met with Piaget, but we were welcomed by his colleague Barbel Inhelder and each of us were fascinated with the pragmatic clinical way in which this Swiss research group dealt with children. Their method and research was at the service of a conception of intellectual development.

I tend to think this journey marked Jean-Claude's care as an academic researcher and an analyst for different organizations (I have in mind road safety and arts & crafts): not to separate the study of concrete and everyday social practices from a global conception of mental life, in this case, that of social representations. Of course, evocation of this experience has long been associated with the enjoyment of being together. Only when preparing the present contribution to this special issue an added value merged with that lasting sensation of youth happiness. At the

1 Old french car, known for its slow speed ('always first in traffic jams')

time, Paul Nizan's *Aden Arabie* was published for the first time by Maspero, and that beautiful story started like this (I'm quoting from memory): ' *I do not allow anyone to say 20 is the most beautiful age in life* '.

After giving it a thought, I would now consider myself in contradiction with that once appreciated formulation. It is true that Nizan's youth unfolded in the middle of World War II while ours during the postwar boom. Yet, this historical relativism does not suffice to account for such a change in my judgment. With time, with retrospective distanciation, I now tend to think these times of learning, training, along with the enjoyment of being together, were times of priceless trust in ourselves for inventing a collective practice. Nowadays, in these times of crisis, Nizan's statement might actually ring true again, in the ears of a generation facing unemployment issues among other things.

TO INTERVENE, TO COMMUNICATE AND TO INTERVIEW

The topic of communication was the focus of a constant interest in Jean-Claude Abric's academic work and practice. He introduced successive generations of students to the general scheme of communication. This issue was the topic of a widely edited book by Armand Colin. At first though he was interested in interviewing, more specifically in unstructured interviews, and you will easily figure out why I care. He and Pierre Miollan wrote a paper on that topic in 1966 or 1967, which I was unfortunately unable to find. Besides being one of Jean-Claude's first writings, just before 1968 and following great interest in Carl Rogers's work, this text describes a constant attitude when conducting interviews: that of non-directiveness and client centration.

The authority he bore among his colleagues and that he was granted in several intervention places was, through GIFRESH or other academic organizations (Direction board, National board of universities – CNU), based upon a paradoxical blend with non-directiveness. I prefer referring to the notion of 'listening' in the perspective of psychoanalytical clinical work. He had clearly told me that he identified himself with that notion, by quoting *in extenso* the definition I wrote in my book on communication entitled *A hundred words for clinical interviewing*, in his.

For practical purposes, one will concede, this term perfectly fits a way of being with one's colleagues, with his way of easily displaying a silent and benevolent attention to everyone he

spoke with. This way of being with everyone also naturally applied to his attitude when gaming, and extended to any professional relationship with people requesting interventions. Even if he occasionally refused some motives and ways of intervening that he mastered, he was always able to make the recipients perceive their relevance. Can we conclude that at a scientific level, in the field of social representations, a same kind of principle was true? I would be tempted to think so. It seems that, once he adopted theoretical stances in that field, he firmly held them without refusing to fit their setting of application.

Once again, we must emphasize the way Jean-Claude stressed the importance of application in his social psychological practice. The cautiousness he made his clients agree with was perfectly in line with his obvious tendency to intervene, and could not be associated with some kind of passiveness. Everyone knows he accepted various responsibilities within the Faculty of Psychology, within the University of Provence and the CNU. He labeled his way of intervening through training and research 'controlling', which was no overstatement. In fact, it was all about intervening among central places of decision-making or influence. This reminder does not take us too far from *a research practice at the heart of social life*. He never gave up the assumption of intervention; which is an overlapping of social representations and actions or maybe a way of controlling the direction of various organizations, their changing practices marked by the influence of social representations.

I am tempted to merge social representations with unconscious ones, which role in the making of symptoms, suffering and complaints among subjects or communities forces us to re-assess the hope for control. This hope never disappeared from Jean-Claude's discourse, up to the end, at least from what he said to me, and I am inclined to argue he believed it without overestimating its validity. If, at the time of our youth spent together, this pretense of control was some kind of temporary and necessary dream, it was progressively dismantled by facts, by life, by the experience of unshakable suffering, by acknowledgment of inherent limitations to human existence.

Also – it is a question I'm asking social representations researchers – does describing the effect of representational processes guarantee controlling it? In my practice, and from the experience of transference, the analyzed and analyst can both acknowledge the effect of unconscious representations on themselves. As regards controlling it, I tend to believe this belief to be revealing the need, for both, to keep conducting the analysis. In fact, - and I'm answering

the question I've just asked to social representations experts – the aim of identifying subjective, social and unconscious representations is not that of control but that of understanding, of awareness. To be aware of a representation's effect allows for better dealing with it and not always coping with it by compromising and producing symptoms.

By bringing up such general remarks, I'm not avoiding the risk of beating up a straw man, hence the need to go back to Jean-Claude's attitude as a researcher. That of a subject singularly marked by life accidents he had to endure and creator of a research agenda whose aim was to acknowledge the effect of processes that evaded the grasp of individuals. After all, devoting academic and field research to what evades control, to what pops up without one being able to seize it is the hallmark of every scientific investigation. The making of knowledge was always meant to be temporary and volatile. On the basis of a personal history, our friend was, in his way, part of a classical epistemic approach. In order to highlight the way of thinking in this life trajectory, I need to face the risk of inappropriate exhibitionism and thereby to use two elements, one taken from the personal life of Jean-Claude, the other from observation of his writing practice.

FROM PERSONAL PATH TO RESEARCH AGENDA

Since his teenage year, long before devoting research to social representations, Jean-Claude had to face a form of un-representable event: the brutal death of his father. Through our friendly conversations along several decades, he mentioned this event on many occasions. He was able to examine its consequences clearly, without ever making any connection with his research interests in social psychology. To be honest, he referred to it in an indirect manner when, outside our conversations, he succeeded in making me agree with the two main philosophical assertions he frequently stated. I will quote them from memory: one is taken from Paul Valéry's *Sea Cemetary*: *'the wind rises, we must attempt to live'*. The other one is *'living is fighting'*. I don't remember him telling me the name of this quote's author, I might have forgotten it, nevertheless, with time and not only within the final stage of his life, I felt like he himself had written it.

It is thus following some kind of aftermath that I allow myself to draw a connection between his real interest in studying social representations and some early experience of the un-

representable: that of death's 'realness'. Assuming existence of the unthinkable could have powered his research program, far more than advances in computing technology. On the other hand, describing how subjects acts without deciding it and understanding how they are determined without choosing it falls under a rebellion necessary to science's progress. These interpretations never were submitted to their recipient, it is likely they would have received a real and friendly interest without necessarily being approved.

While receptive of all kinds of discourses, Jean-Claude remained firm as regards the (obviously core) nucleus of his scientific advances. I would tend to propose defining the effect of representations as one that is operated by a subject when looking at objects. This certain gaze he naturally displayed through each of his interpersonal relationships might well be acknowledged in the way he conducted experimental social psychological research, psychosocial investigations and directed organizations dedicated to research. The share of certainty and confidence that can be found in his way of intervening on the field of personal relationships and on that of psychosocial practice coexisted peacefully with uncertainty and doubt, if I may refer to observations of his concrete way of writing, reporting his research and psychosocial investigations. My statement dates back to the last century and the overwhelming presence of computers might have modified, on the surface, the peculiar way he wrote. My maybe-obsolete observation is the following: pencil and eraser were the only instruments in the shaping of his thought. He wrote two theses along with many research reports in that way. As is the case with several facts reported in this contribution, this observation was not thoroughly commented or discussed in presence of those concerned. Once again, I will effectively depart from a shared ascertainment to a questionable interpretation, which I doubt Jean-Claude would share the implications. I propose acknowledging thereby a heuristic principle defined by Gaston Bachelard in his time, that I, yet again, will quote from memory, '*scientific discovery is the product of a series of errors*'.

I would also like to draw upon the apparent anecdotes in order to reveal a constitutive element of a man's and a researcher's attitude, that brings us back to the notion of intervention. While he did not automatically refuse to do so, our colleague was not very fond of engaging in epistemological arguments. In this perspective, I would suggest that action engaged him in epistemological choices, here in the case of concrete writing. His way of writing with a pencil without ever dropping the eraser from his other free hand attests, through practise, of a coherent

epistemological stance, a way of intervening without necessarily making use of sometimes 'superfluous' justification.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I would bear upon a last detail related to the researcher's writing practice. His favorite time for meeting with pencil and eraser in front of a blank page for describing, reporting the results and interpretation of his work was the middle of the night: in other words from well after midnight to dawn. I am not sure of accounting for a reliable meaning when reporting his relation to research and to time, but doing so gives me an opportunity to share a clinician's belief beyond the narrow circle where I usually put myself at risk: the devil is in the details. Choosing this moment to write was first due to hyperactivity; to the multiple commitments our friend took during daytime. Yet, I will choose to detect another dimension to choosing the silence of nighttime: the need to fully face oneself during such moments of creativity (another topic of Jean-Claude's first research).

Separated from environmental stimuli by the relative peace of nighttime, and forced to find within himself what is to communicate, the researcher is ready to start the job. The loneliness provoked by his departure gives me the opportunity for a last comment: it's through absence and distance from the object that a thought and a discourse may rise. It is what I have tried to do. Is it one of the prerequisites for producing a research breakthrough? You've already understood that, underneath this interrogative formulation lays my pleasure to share with you this last statement. Jean-Claude would not have contradicted me on a final point: when we talk about someone else, something is said about ourselves.

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