

Jean-Claude Abric: Social Practice at the Heart of Scientific Research

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ABSTRACT

This article goes back to a few historical landmarks and debates, which were at stake for social psychology in the nineties when Jean-Claude Abric investigated and questioned relationships between SR and social practices. Controversy on causality, social change processes and intervention strategies are still crucial issues in SR research.

Keywords: social practices, social change, Jean-Claude Abric.

I wanted to take advantage of this opportunity for freedom, which is given to me, maybe uncautiously, in order to go back to vague and interrogating memories. Twenty years ago, there was an important moment in the history of Aix en Provence's Social Psychology Laboratory (LPS). This moment was the edition of the 1994 book 'Social practices and representations'. It was our first collective work that included that of several members from our laboratory.

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When the book came out Jean-Claude Abric was happy, because it was an achievement that would trigger a promising development of the research agenda he wanted to carry out. But he was disappointed that the editor changed the title from 'Social representations and practices' to 'Social practices and representations'. He wanted to stress that the social nature whose importance was to be demonstrated, was indeed that of representations. The rest of the story confirmed he was right in concentrating all his efforts on the field of representations, in which social nature embeds itself. But, I figured the anecdotal shift of social nature from representations to practise maybe made sense and that after all; social nature might just be like out of range elements in many psychological research.

And so I have had a weird desire of going back through social nature's journey among social psychologists, shifting between representations and practises. Without performing any meta-analysis, I chose to put myself back in the 90's, which, according to vague memories, were a turning point in the situation and development of research that were conducted up to the 'imaginary' 2000 dot.com bubble.

THE EMERGENCE OR ERASEMENT OF SOCIAL NATURE IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

'I'm talking about a time people under 20 can not know of'...

(Song from Charles Aznavour and Jacques Plante, 1965)

During the 90's in Aix-en-Provence, humanities' social nature was rather to be found in sociology. Social psychology displayed a fragile identity that we 'elderly' defined in our classes as that of a 'crossroads science' or a new 'moving discipline'. In Aix, a scientific independence based on experimental methods and care for model-building was put forward by Claude Flament and reinforced when Jean-Claude Abric arrived in 1966. A professionalizing training course was created, which drew upon two recently created diplomas at the Paris Institute of Psychology; that of 'Industrial Psychology' and 'Social Psychology'. Their main orientations were synthesized by Jean-Claude Abric in a unique two-years training course labelled 'Industrial and Social psychology' (DPSI). Group dynamics and group work were a central part of it, which, somehow,

has now been forgotten. Social psychology still displayed it as a defining characteristic, whose inventions our friend and colleague Pierre De Visscher defended and whose shifts he denounced up to now (De Visscher, 2001). The 'french seminar', reshaped by René Kaës (1972) and Didier Anzieu (1971), was a special place for training and experimenting about individual and collective change, and 'social' psychologists were not afraid to collaborate with those psychologists we then called 'clinicians'. Many 'psycho-sociologists' could be found in France, to whom small, large or narrow groups were formidable contexts for research and intervention. Adult training was willingly conducted by academics, but, as psychosociologists from that time – such as those from ARIP (psychosociological research and intervention association, which inspired the creation of GIFRESH) – related so well, some kind of tension existed between academia and the 'outside' world activities that Jean Dubost (1987) called 'the world of social practice'. At that time, one could still find time for working extensively on interpersonal relationships by relying on techniques taken from Rogers' non-directiveness movement during interviews. We did this during face-to-face interactions which were not yet mediated by Skype or computerized exchanges. Jean-Claude Abric had set up his excellent course on multi-level communication practices (Abric, 1996). The observable and perceivable social nature could be found among group life but also in the workings of organizations, institutions, and social networks. Researchers were looking for the social nature of person-to-person interaction and found it. They often found it among power and influence relationships and issues related to change.

Some of us, a bit 'delayed' were still passionate about ideology as a mask for knowledge of 'social' phenomena (Morin, 1976). We navigated through psychoanalysts' critical approach, cognitive revolutions and the subtle wordy works of the althusserian-foucauldian-lacanian. We passionately converged and diverged on the thorough delimiting of disciplinary borders. As regards conceptualization of social nature and specification of the 'psychosocial', Willem Doise's 1982 four level model greatly helped us, because it allowed us to connect individual with inter-individual observations up to societal scale.

In Aix as in everywhere else, social nature materialized itself through requests from institutions, which were answered by research and intervention protocols and strategies drawing upon scientifically validated knowledge from French and foreign Universities. Requests were welcomed and analysed, analysis of requests was considered an action. Drawing upon institutional psychology's critical dynamics of the 60's, we still made a distinction between social

request and social demand, and tried to uncover collective life's 'hidden', 'censored' or 'unacknowledged' dimensions through investigation. A tension regularly went through small social psychological teams, between experimental and applied research, theory and practice, studies and research, between executions of pre-established demands and critical analysis of what they could cover up for.

Jean-Claude Abric was fighting hard for the complementary development of experimental 'laboratory' and field social psychology. Shortly before 2000, his efforts were translated into the creation of an applied social psychology position, which served as the basis for working in three 'big' fields of problematic practices: environment, already put forward by Gabriel Moser (2009), public health, which was crossed by discourses about 'risks', 'integration' and 'social deviance' (Abric 1996). To face these issues was to face what Serge Moscovici defined at the end of the 70's (Moscovici, 1984) as a formidable workspace for social psychology: the conflict between the individual and society. In this perspective, social nature is psychosocial and is nothing more than a perpetual conflictual interaction between the psychological and societal phenomena.

The 90's were the 'AIDS years' and the years of a gradual expansion of crises within society, that were paradoxical years for social psychology: with the increasing severity of problems more and more labelled as 'social' came the increasing methodological and theoretical specialization and separation of subdomains, correlated with vibrant appeals to interdisciplinary work. Willingness to get closer to the field of social requests was nevertheless easily coupled with an eagerness for distance because of increasing methodological demands.

At the end of the 90's, when Thémis Apostolidis arrived at the LPS, we realized an approach to social phenomena in the domain of health by creating a Social Psychology of Health Master's degree, and were able to merge our theses regarding the social nature of social psychology by putting ourselves under the banner of 'social context and health' (Morin & Apostolidis, 2002). It was a time when universities began to be pressured for 'reorganization', a time of confusion and conflict between fields but also a time of uncertainty during which acknowledging the emergence of suffering, fears and threats created calls going beyond the cracked walls of our academic places. It is what I call the 'appearance of the whale'. A forgotten monster hidden in the depths of sea suddenly appears. What should we do? Watch, contemplate and take pictures. What if it were a nice whale? What's there to do when social nature realizes itself among groups and individuals that call or threaten?

THE 'LINK BETWEEN SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND PRACTICES' ARGUMENT

During the 90's, tough debates took place among the LPS, regarding the weight social psychology could or should assign to behaviour and social practices. The last chapter of the 1994 book I've mentioned clearly illustrates the stakes of this now pacified argument. The debated issue looks like a byzantine argument or an ancient controversy regarding causality. I quote: "*do social practices determine representations or is it the opposite?*" (Abric, 1994, p. 217). Jean-Claude Abric had a great sense of humour and was not fond of abstract speculation. If he engaged in this kind of dispute that meant it was of great importance for guiding research application strategies. This was not only about knowing who's right but also about planing relevant and acceptable agendas, actions or interventions for clearly stated social diagnosis or social change purposes.

Jean-Claude Abric opposed what he called a "radical conception" regarding the place and function of practices, a conception according to which "only practices determine representations" (1994, p. 218). On the contrary, he argued for "highlighting the determination of practices by social representations" (p. 222). To him, thesis #1 (practices determine representations) assumed an individual subjected to his context and manipulable without knowing it. Thesis #2 (social representations determine practices) implied an active individual often blinded by his beliefs but capable of fitting his environment to his needs Jean-Claude Abric hated the idea of an individual subjected to context and, in a general manner the use of materialist explanations.

He preferred very much the idea of willingly adaptating to social situations in which one is engaged, be it individually elaborated and accepted as in a poker game, or multiplied in a community and supported by a wise guide such as a counsellor or a coach in a project of change within an organization. Appropriation of the surroundings and environment goes by the notion of 'situation definition' that was assumed to be loaded with social representations which were thought as bases for action and decision-making. The shift from a definition of situation to practice and action was nowhere near a scientifically assessable mechanistic process.

It was a complex process in which an ill-determined degree of freedom was by principle left to the individual. At the time, we weren't ashamed of using Moscovici's poetic crafts such as

social representations are 'compasses for action' or even the clarifying-synthesizing words of Denise Jodelet which, instead of perpetuating the representation-practice opposition, evoked 'practical thoughts' (Jodelet, 2006). I will not list the full number of theoretical arguments from both opposing sides. I will only say that an essential aspect of this controversy had to do with the status of knowledge in the genesis and transformation of social practices and, consequently, with defining the necessary amount of time to devote to this study.

If, for instance, one wanted to intervene in the domain of HIV prevention, one could make great efforts as I did with our students in order to listen to and try to understand representations and experience of the so-called 'at risk' groups. But one could, without waiting too much, as Robert-Vincent Joule did, implement compliance packages leading to greater condom use or screening without worrying too much about the complexity of social actors' systems of thoughts and attitudes, whatever the original variation in attitudes and knowledge. If, however, one wanted to use a social representations approach within the real social life of social groups, one had to conduct a long investigation in order to understand before controlling and developing strategies of voluntary change.

One entered in problematic systems of practices by methods of inquiry that assumed stepwise communication strategies, from collection to transmission of results. One produced psychosocial diagnosis by deconstructing and re organizing data that a priori did not make sense. In a post-Lewinian tradition, one would then implement measures of guidelines for voluntary change, which take into account the communicated results.

TO THE RESEARCHER, A CHANGE IN THE WORLD'S AFFAIRS

What kind of changes was psychosocial research requested for during the 90 's? For all I know, it regarded most of the time novel emerging practices which one could think reflected 'emerging representations' as Michel-Louis Rouquette liked to call them, or disrupting practices from the perspective of experts' norms of planned behaviours. One did not make enough use of public transportation and we wondered why, one would consume energy in an irrational way, one would not donate one's blood while he could have done so, one would not be careful during sexual

intercourse while sexual intercourse is dangerous, one would not comply with medical prescriptions and so on.

The LPS' two main theoretical options would be the basis for creating wanting responses. The 'social representations' option supported by Jean-Claude Abric and I could not lend itself to quick operations and ready-made solutions at that time. It indeed supposed an in-depth exploration of practices' context of display, their history, legitimation, actors' experience and point of view. 'Doing' under study with regards to representations that guided it, was often subjected to censorship or defiance against investigators.

Another paradoxical issue to accept: core nucleus model's first formulations did not render the task easy to those using it and not only for technical reasons. It implied hypotheses of resistance to change, even if peripheral elements were deemed to be more flexible. By definition, principles of representations' core organization or components were not supposed to be easily changeable. We therefore took the risk of discovering complexity, which was not always understandable to requesting partners as they were more and more inclined towards impatience.

Then there also were, fortunately, new controversies that frequently emerged and reappeared among researchers and popped out during seminars and congresses regarding our theories or reference models. For instance, we argued on the status of action, too loosely defined, on the status of intentions and implication, of values, on the status of the social subject. And I wouldn't dare talk about the more and more sophisticated methodological requirements and demands for assessment and sound data, which were beginning to roughly frame most projects about social change. I will not argue further. The works of Roland Gori (i.e., Gori, 2013) contain an impressive and updated enough picture of all that.

CONCLUSION

I wanted to make a journey into the strange and complex dynamics that occasionally leads social psychological research into trying to integrate itself in a moving social life. It is a daring dive into what Aristotle called *pragmata*, that is, human affairs (according to wikipedia¹). But I will insist that the fight between *pragmata* and *themata*, between thematic and pragmatic

¹ Which is an erroneous translation

classifications still has a bright future. Unfortunately nowadays the world is burning and we're burning the world and time is running out. Fortunately for young researchers social and psychological research has become positive and used in helping everyone access individual happiness. Anyway, we will nevertheless miss Jean-Claude Abric's merry realism very much!

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