

## BOOK REVIEW

**Jean-Claude Abric (1994). *Pratiques sociales et représentations*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.**

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This collective book, directed by Jean-Claude Abric, is divided into eight chapters. In the first chapter (entitled *Les représentations sociales: Aspects théoriques*), Abric defines social representations as "socio-cognitive constructions" (p. 14) which have both cognitive and social components. The meaning of a social representation is determined by the discursive and social context. Moreover, Abric develops the hypothesis of the "noyau central" which has been presented elsewhere (Abric, 1987). This is a structural approach to social representations. The "Noyau Central" (NC) creates, organizes, transforms and gives the meaning to the social representation. The NC is the key element in defining and distinguishing between different social representations. Two representations could share the same elements (informations, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, etc. and, nonetheless, they can be different representations because those elements which configure the NC are different.

The "peripheral elements" are organized around the NC. They are hierarchically structured. This peripheral system protects the NC against the incongruent informations. Moreover, the peripheral system adapts the NC to specific contexts and it also allows "individualized social representations" to develop.

The importance given to the structural analysis of social representations leads Abric to propose a specific methodology which is developed in the third chapter (*Méthodologie de recueil des représentations sociales*). This methodology is carried out on three steps:

- 1.- Finding out the contents of the representation.
- 2.- Studying the relationships among the elements of the representations; their hierarchy and their relative weights.
- 3.- Establishing the NC.

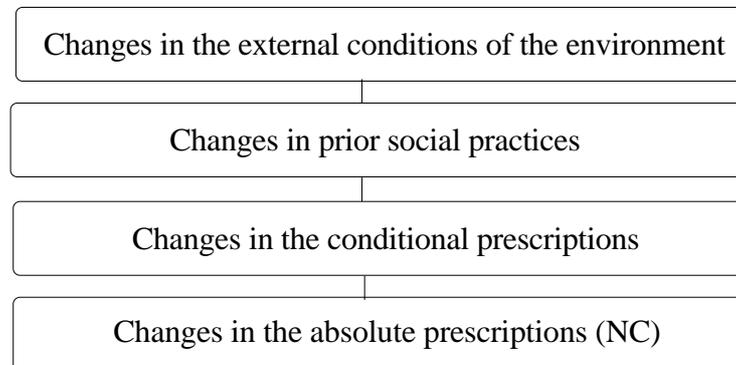
Abric develops several methods for collecting data (interview, questionnaire, projective methods, pictures, associative maps, etc.), for analyzing the hierarchy and structure of the representation (paired-comparison; successively hierarchized trees, etc.), and detecting the NC. In these methods, the subjects actively take part in the processes of analyzing the structure of the social representations.

Flament (chapter two: *Structure, dynamique et transformation des représentations sociales*) introduces a new aspect into the structural analysis of representations: The cognitions which configure the representations are at the same time descriptive and prescriptive. The concept of prescription subsumes all kind of cognitions which can affect the behaviour (e.g. "it can be done...", "it must be done..."). Moreover, Flament (p. 38) states that "*the prescriptions are massively conditional*". Although the prescriptions appear as unconditional in the discourse (e.g. "sick people must be helped"), cognitively they are generally conditional (e.g.. the general norm is not applied when the sick person is a drug user). It is important to detect whether the apparently unconditional prescriptions are in fact conditional ones.

The "absolute prescriptions" (unconditional) work as organizing principals. They are elements of the Noyau Central. These unconditional prescriptions can be organized in a unique system; Then we speak of a NC, and the representation is labeled "autonomous

representation". By contrast, they can be organized in several systems; then, the representation is named non-autonomous.

In addition to this structural analysis, Flament develops the topic about the changes in the social representations induced by changes in the prior social practices. His theoretical position can be represented as follows (p. 49):



Flament hypothesizes several kinds of changes in the social representations depending on three factors: (a) Are the changes in the social practices induced by the changes in the environment reversible or irreversible?; (b) Are the new social practices legitimate or illegitimate according to the prescriptions drawn from prior social representation?, and (c) have the justifications (good reasons) of the new social practices been generated inside of the social representation? or have they been imposed?.

The topic of the relationship between social practices and social is also analyzed by Abric in the last chapter (Chapter eight: *Pratiques sociales, représentations sociales*-). Abric starts criticizing the "hypothesis of rationalization" developed by Beauvois and Joule (1981). This hypothesis stated that the causal relation goes from social -practices to ideologies (here social representations). Abric says that this causal direction can change depending on the following factors: (a) are the individual's choices restricted by the context or not?; and (b) does the context trigger strong affective reactions? or is it necessary to defend or justify the social identity or the group's practices? If one of these elements is present, then the causal link should go from the social representation to the social practice.

As far as the changes in social representations are concerned, these changes depend on the new social practices. The changes happen when the new situation is irreversible. In other words, subjects cannot come back to the old social practice. Moreover, the changes in the social representations can adopt three forms:

(a) *Progressive change*: this happens when the new social practices are not completely contradictory to the social representation.

(b) *Resistant change*: this happens when the new social practices are incongruent with the prior representation but defensive processes start working (justifications, rationalizations, etc.)

(c) *Brutal change*: this happens when there are strong contradictions between the new social practices and the old representations and the defensive processes cannot work.

The rest of chapter (4,5,6, and 7) show several researches which support the structural approach as well as the effects of the new social practices on the prior social representations.

Guimelli (Chapter four: *Le fonction d'infirmière. Pratiques et représentations sociales*.) finds two representations among the nurses. These representations are organized around the roles they fulfill: (a) the first representation is structured around the traditional role (the role

of nurses is that of executing medical prescriptions), while (b) the second one is organized around the "proper role" (the nurses are seen as having their own duties, different and complementary to the medical duties).

In chapter five, Morin (*Entre représentations et pratiques: le Sida, la prévention et les jeunes*) studies the changes in the preventive behaviors against AIDS among young people. Three discourses about the condom, the preventive behaviour and the AIDS were found: (a) one discourse which assumes the medical preventive messages and takes the form of "protected-love" or "preservative-love". There is a defiance and latent culpability underlying this discourse. (b) The second discourse is a reactive reaction against medical messages. The therapy of the disease is the responsibility of the medical staff. The diagnostics of AIDS becomes part of the social routine. They give the benediction to new sexual relations. (c) There is another discourse which shows a suspicious submission to the precaution messages. Feelings of doubt, fear, and culpability underlie this discourse.

Mardellat (Chapter six: *Pratiques commerciales et représentations dans l'artisanat*) shows how the artisans' commercial practices go along with congruent representations of themselves and their environment. These social representations include representations of themselves, of their clients and of their competitors. Two different representations were found: (a) the first one is shared by the less active artisans, those who define themselves as artisans, hand-workers, and victims of the modern times. They define their clients as apathetic, and insensible to the innovations. The competitors (other artisans) are seen as disloyal and inaccessible. (b) The second representations is shared by the more active artisans. Clients are seen as sensible to innovations and the competitors as accessible.

Finally, Singéry (Chapter seven: *Représentations sociales et projet de changement technologique en entreprise*) studies the influence that the social representations of the new technology have on the performance in the workplace, and on the dynamics of work-groups. Two work-teams were compared. The social representation shared by the members of the team B was more evaluative and specific. Their permanent point of reference was the past. They have a negative view of the effects of the new technologies on performance and work conditions. The second work team (A) shared a more explanatory representation which tries to explain the processes of changes in the factory as a result of technological innovations. Their view of the future is positive. They think that the technological innovations will have positive effects on performance and work conditions.

What could be said about the novelties which can be found in this book? As it was said above, the hypothesis of the "noyau central" has been exposed elsewhere. The main novelty of this book could be the theoretical analysis of the problem of the causal relationship between social practices and representations in general, and social representations in particular. It must be remembered that this is a non-resolved, long-date controversy (controversy between the representationists-idealist and the materialists). As it was said, Abric begins his analysis with a criticism to the approach defended by Beauvois and Joule. The solution he offers is interesting and suggestive but it has same flaws. It could solve the problem of the direction of causality in the relation between practices and representations when the representations have been established, but what about the genetic analysis of social representations? I think that the hypothesis of "rationalization" exposed by Beauvois and Joule remains suggestive from the genetic perspective. The kingdom of representativeness which has been imposed by the cognitive mainstream (social cognition) continues to exercise an important influence on the solution offered by Abric.

Another interesting novelty is that of the "conditional prescriptions" exposed by Flament. This approach allows a more context-dependent view of social representations. This concept

could offer some answers to important and unresolved questions such as: the contradiction within social representations, the dynamic character of representations, etc. His point of view could also answer some criticism which has been developed by Billig. The conditional and context dependent character of the peripheral system of social representations could explain the flexibility of social representations in argumentative contexts.

Overall, it is an interesting book which should be carefully read.

### **References**

- Abric, J.C. (1987). *Cooperation, competition et représentations sociales*. Fribourg: Del Val.
- Beauvois, J.L. and Joule, R.V. (1981). *Soumission et idéologies. Psychosociologie de la rationalisation*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.