

## **From the Study of Social Practices to the Study of "Distance to the Object"**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article, written in memory of Jean-Claude Abric, aims to present some conceptual developments of the so called "Ecole Aixoise" concerning the role of social practices in the dynamic of SR, explore some characteristics of the notion of social practices and the ambiguities and issues associated with this notion in the field of SR, and present a recent conceptual option entitled "Distance to the Object".

**Keywords:** social representations, social practices, distance to the object, Jean-Claude Abric.

The work and writings of Jean-Claude Abric have contributed significantly to the development of the Social Representations Theory. The Central Core Theory (or structural model)<sup>1</sup> of the SR developed by Jean-Claude Abric (1976) is an important reference in this field. A book edited by Jean-Claude Abric and published in 1994, "*Social Practices and Representations*", greatly helped to disseminate the works of the so-called "Ecole Aixoise". This book is also important because it presents a set of empirical contributions and theoretical reflections on the link between social practices, behaviours and the dynamic of social representations (SR).

This paper, written in the memory of Jean-Claude Abric, aims to examine the link between individuals/groups and the object of SR. My contribution aims firstly to present some conceptual developments of the "Ecole Aixoise" concerning the role of social practices in the dynamic of SR, secondly, to explore some characteristics of the notion of social practices and the ambiguities and issues associated with this notion in the field of SR, and thirdly, to present a recent conceptual option entitled "Distance to the Object", developed and investigated empirically in collaboration with Jean-Claude Abric, and some challenges for the future.

## **SOCIAL PRACTICES AND REPRESENTATIONS**

### **Social practices and the dynamic of social representations**

The analysis of the link that an individual or group has with the social object is an important area of research in the SR field. Indeed, the nature of the link that the group has with the object of

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<sup>1</sup> "The basis of the central core theory is to consider that, in the overall picture of cognitive elements which make up a representation, certain elements play a different role than others. These elements, entitled central elements, form a structure named by Abric the "central core". This internal structure of representations provides two essential functions: (a) a meaning generative function (...) and (b) an organisational function" (Rateau, Moliner, Guimelli, & Abric, 2012, p. 484).

representation is a good resource for analysing and explaining the processes associated with the development, structuration, functioning and dynamics of SR. This link was explored in particular through the study of the role of social practices (Abric, 1994; Guimelli, 1994, 1998). For some authors, social practices determine the constitution of representations (Flament, 1989; Flament & Rouquette, 2003; Sá, 1994) and play a fundamental role in the dynamics of representations (i.e. the modification of the representation state and its significance).

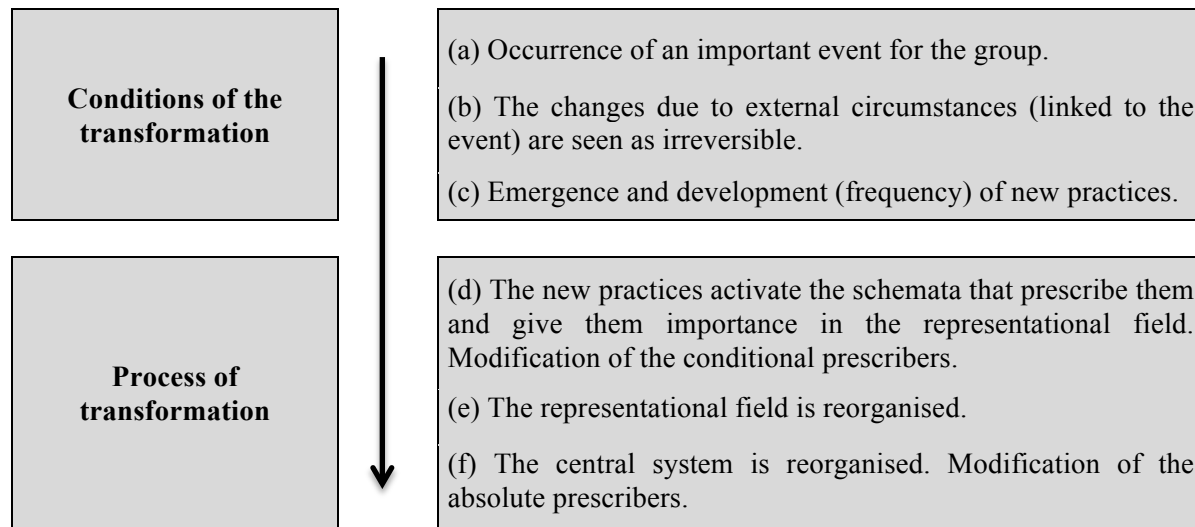
In the structural model of the SR, the dynamic of the representations is conditioned by a number of socio-cognitive mechanisms which represent "levels" in the change process (see Abric, 1994, 2001; Flament, 1994; Guimelli 1994, 1998)<sup>2</sup>. It is possible to distinguish in this dynamic (a) the conditions of transformation and (b) the process of transformation itself. In this set, social practices play a leading role; their progressive implementation in the social reality of the object constitutes the medium through which the change of the SR occurs (see Figure 1). To summarise, the group is confronted with an important event (and its external circumstances<sup>3</sup>) that produces irreversible changes for the group. These changes bring about the emergence and the development of new practices (or the more important activation of old practices, which are not central in the activity of the group). These practices activate schemata that prescribe or regulate them. The representational field and the central core of the SR are reorganised.

**Figure 1** Transformation of a social representation (adapted from Abric, 2001; Flament, 1994; Guimelli, 1994, 1998)

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the theme of this special issue, I refer principally to this approach in my contribution. Of course, there are many theoretical discussions and proposals (inside and outside the SR field) that are useful for examining this issue (e.g. Bourdieu, 1972; Guerin, 1994; Giddens, 1984; Jodelet, 1989; Reckwitz, 2002; Sá, 1994; Schatzki, 1996; Wagner, 1993, 2003; Wagner & Hayes, 2005; Wachelke & Camargo, 2007; Warde, 2005)

<sup>3</sup> "External circumstances are any state of the world outside the social representation" (Flament, 2011, p. 63).



The theoretical propositions developed by the different authors of the "Ecole Aixoise" are particularly heuristic. However, for us three main limitations may be mentioned concerning these works. Firstly, social practices are not well defined, secondly, social practices are frequently studied as a behaviour or a system of behaviours and thirdly, the way in which the transformation of SR occurs through the "new practices" is not well explained.

### **Social practices: what are they?**

Many authors have made the observation that a "clear" conceptualisation of the concept of social practice is lacking (e.g., Abric 1994; Sá, 1994; Flament 2001; Flament & Rouquette, 2003; Jodelet & Moscovici, 1990; Maisonneuve, 2000). The definition of social practices is marked by some diversity (e.g., box 1). Some of these definitions serve to emphasize the importance of "norms, of various fields and social settings where the actors act" (Maisonneuve, 2000, p. 222). Flament (2001) places some limitations on Jodelet and Moscovici's definition (1990). These relate to the fact that we cannot identify the theoretical elements related to "action" and "roles". We should add that we cannot observe a clear distinction between behaviour and social practices

in these definitions. Additionally, in the literature we can observe that researchers frequently use a measure of behaviour when they study social practices.

**Box 1** *Some definitions of social practices*

“Practices are action systems, socially structured and instituted in relation to roles” (Jodelet & Moscovici, 1990, p. 287).

“Social practices are ritualised social actions (...). Social practices are common actions which are periodically created and recreated. They give community unity and personality” (Echebarria & Gonzalez, 1993).

“Complex systems of actions socially invested and obedient to socially and historically determined issues” (Abric, 1994, p. 7).

“Sets of finalised behaviours by and for social groups” (Moliner, 1998, p. 63).

"The action embedded in social life which regulates legitimacy and validity of thought" (Flament & Rouquette, 2003, p. 56).

“Social practices are somehow the interface between the external circumstances and the internal prescribers” (Flament, 2011, p. 63).

In numerous definitions, social practices are embedded in social life, and are viewed as the product of a “shared social genesis” (e.g., Sá, 1994). They also constitute a system. Defining social practices as a system allows us to take account of behaviours and actions, as part of an established unit in which they are socially linked. In this sense, practice would constitute a “reasoned authority” for behaviour and actions; “behavioural raw material” (Sá, 1994, p. 44). For others, behaviour and SR are not separated: “The theoretical necessity of considering representations (i.e. cognitive, affective, iconic and symbolic content) as comprising behaviour as also *an integral part of the representation* and not as *being linked to or determined by a representation*” (Wagner, 1994, p. 4).

For our part, we need to adopt a cultural theoretical perspective that aims to explain and

understand the actions, by reconstructing the symbolic structures of knowledge which enable and constrain the agents to interpret the world according to some forms, and to behave accordingly (see. Reckwitz, 2002). A number of characteristics can be used to describe social practices (Table 1). This non-exhaustive list can mark out the "boundaries" of the psychosocial investigation of these practices in the study of SR.

**Table 1** Some characteristics of social practices

<b>Characteristics</b>	
<b>Social</b>	The set of behaviours or actions are part of a social dynamic and a social context.
<b>System</b>	Practices (behaviours and actions) are the elements of an established unit, in which they are socially linked.
<b>Identity</b>	Practices help to build and define the groups.
<b>Historicity</b>	The system of behaviours and actions derives from a collective history (e.g. social memory, tradition).
<b>Reflexivity</b>	Practices can be analysed (analyse of the logics that constitute action) by the subjects and the social groups.
<b>Transparency</b>	Practices can function without their internal logic being directly accessible to the social actor.
<b>Composite</b>	Practices are protean (e.g. behaviours, actions, communications, rituals).
<b>Finalised</b>	Practices are goal-oriented (implicit or explicit).
<b>Knowledge</b>	Practices reflect the meaning that the object of practice can assume (e.g. signifying practices).

## THE CONCEPT OF DISTANCE TO THE OBJECT

### The origin of the concept

In the beginning, the first mention of "Distance to the Object" did not present it as a concept *per se*. Jean-Claude Abric spoke about it for the first time in a paper on the development of the structural approach of the SR (Abric, 2001). In his paper, Abric presented the functioning of the central core of the SR where he highlighted a key component of this functioning: the activation process. According to him, in the stable universe constituted by the central core, some elements can be "used" or "solicited" differently for defining the meaning of the object or of the practices associated with this object. The more an element is activated, the "more important a role" it plays in the SR.

In his paper, Abric presented three factors of activation (2001, p. 88). The first factor is *the finality of the situation*: in situations which include pragmatic objectives, the functional elements of the central core are activated; however in a situation of social exchange the normative elements of the central core are activated. The second factor is *the context in which the SR is produced*: Faced with a counter-normative situation, people can "conceal" the most "problematic" elements of the SR - elements that can be associated with a racist opinion for example (see Flament, Guimelli & Abric, 2006; Guimelli & Deschamps, 2000). So, if an individual or a group is confronted with a salient normative situation when he produces his social representation, some elements of the SR could be less activated or be "masked" (also central core elements). Finally, the third factor is *the Distance to the Object (DO)*. Due to the purpose of this paper, we will present this last factor of activation in greater depth.

DO was conceptualised as a three-component variable: knowledge (real and perceived),

involvement (importance, personal identification, perceived ability)<sup>4</sup>, and level of practices (behaviours), all related to the social object under study. In other words, the individuals who are "close" to an object (short distance to it) have a greater knowledge of this object, feel more involved with it, and develop more practices related to this object (i.e. cooking).

For Abric (2001, see Table 2), people considered as distant activated more normative components of the central core of the SR (i.e. linked to values, norms or stereotypes highly salient within the group, and components issued from the value system of individuals that determine judgments and positions taken in relation to the social object), while people who are close rather activated the functional components of the central core of the SR (i.e. concerning the instrumental relations individuals maintain with the object of representation, components associated with descriptive characteristics and with the affiliation of the social object with social or operatory practices).

**Table 2** Relations between the characteristics of the situation of a group and the functioning of the central core of social representations (Abric, 2001)

<b>Characteristics of the situation</b>	<b>Functioning of the central core</b>
No practices and/or large distance to the object	Activation of the evaluative elements
Practice of the object and/or proximity to the object (lower distance)	Activation of the functional elements

<sup>4</sup> See Dany and Abric (2007) for a discussion on the conceptualisation of involvement in the DO perspective and the perspective developed by Rouquette (1997).



Although the concept was initially referred to in relation to the structural approach of the SR, it is not limited to this approach. DO offers a more global examination of the nature of the relationship a group or individuals maintain with the object of representations. The commitment (intentional or not) of the individual in the world and his relation to this world (and thus the object) determines the phenomena of the organisation and construction of the relation to the social object. The sense of the experience does not only vary according to the individual's behaviour concerning the object, it develops in a wider context subject to levels of influence which extend beyond the frame of the subject's social practices.

### **Distance to the object and positioning in the psychosocial environment**

The concept of DO can be seen as a "tool" that positions individuals and groups in the psychosocial environment. From this perspective, the psychosocial environment can be defined as the "place" in which we can observe simultaneously the implementation and updating of (a) the interaction of social and psychological processes at the level of concrete behaviours, (b) the interaction of people and groups as part of everyday life, (c) the junction between the objective approach and the subjective components of the experience of the subjects, (d) the interaction of these diverse processes, of these actors (individuals, groups) and these modalities of knowledge in relation to social objects that are active in the definition of this environment.

The psychosocial environment can be approached not only as an outer frame or as a simple envelope that "surrounds" individuals. It is necessary to consider a real relational and social dynamic generated by the different types of social configurations in a given environment. In other words, to consider the individual and the social as being in a system of interdependence. An analysis of this type takes into account what constitutes and forms the "place" of the

encounter between individuals and social groups but also what pre-exists at this encounter.

With regard to positioning in a psychosocial environment, "DO supposes that each individual can be positioned regarding his own degree of distance to the social object, it then emphasises that each position can be regulated by social and psychosocial variables and it finally stresses that the relationship with the SR object is contextualised" (Dany, Apostolidis & Harabi, 2014, p. 2). Each position specifies the relationship that individuals (or groups) have with the social object and produces different activations of the contents of SR (see Doise, 1986). DO can be a way of analysing "segmentation" (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999) and elucidating, "How do we specify appropriate social segments for the study of social representations?" (p. 176). As we pointed out (Dany, Apostolidis, & Harabi, 2014), this segmentation (or this positioning) is performed *ex-post facto*, by taking into account the outcome of the study. This perspective varies from others who define the "proximity" or the position of individuals or groups *a priori* (e.g. Miguel, Valentim, & Carugati, 2012).

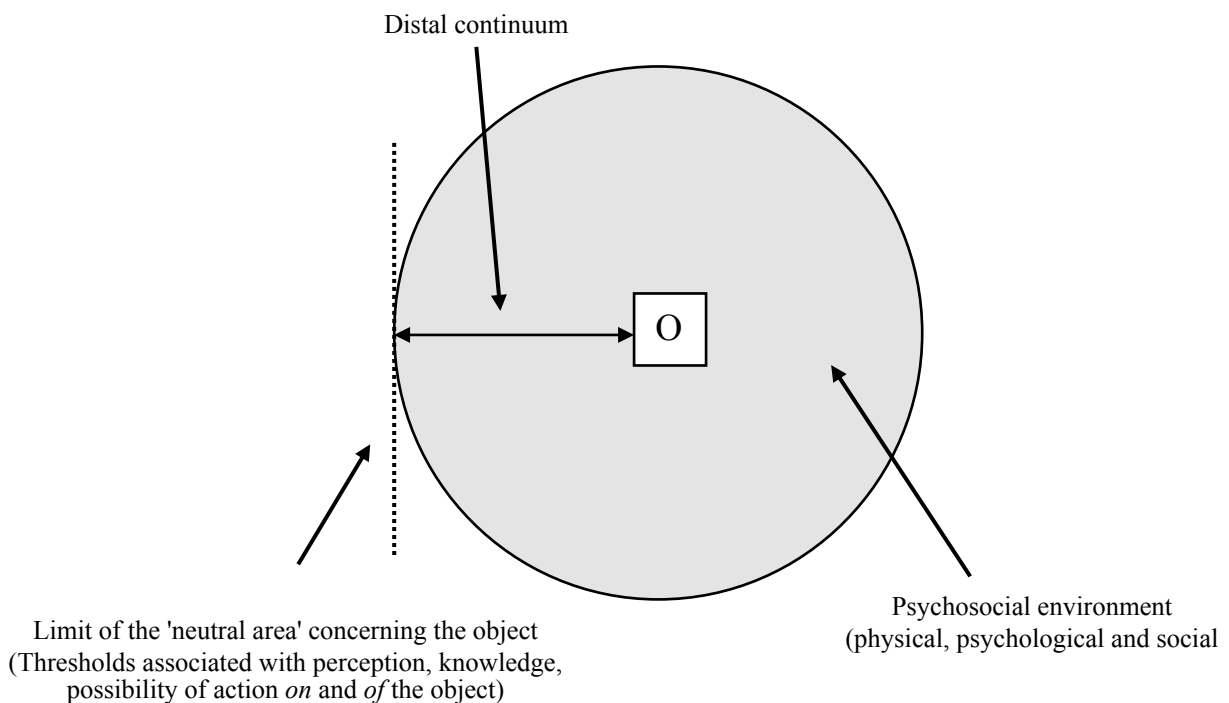
We can try to produce a schematic representation<sup>5</sup> of the DO (Figure 2). The object represented [O] takes place in a psychosocial environment (physical, psychological and social). Considering the relationship that a group or individuals maintain with the object of representations with DO involves the establishment of a "distal continuum" that illustrates the different possible distance modalities, namely: from the greatest distance level (maximum distance) to the lowest distance level (minimum distance). In one case (maximum distance), the object does not exist for the individual or the group; in the other (minimum distance, proximity), the object "becomes one" with the individual or the group. The junction between these two

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<sup>5</sup> This figure does not in itself constitute a theory of the distance to the object but an attempt to illustrate the positioning of the individual (or group) vis-à-vis the object in terms of distance.

"extreme" categories of distance can be represented with an arrow on which the individuals (or group) may be positioned. This position corresponds to a "place" or "level of distance." The position is both static and dynamic because the "place" suggests a form of knowledge of previous places or an anticipation of places "to come."

**Figure 2** Schematic representation of distance to the object



### Empirical investigations

Adopting the conceptual proposition of *Distance to the object*, an initial study on the SR of cannabis (Dany & Abric, 2007) empirically validated this theoretical proposition by demonstrating that DO can mobilise different SR dimensions. We built a DO variable that included the three components (level of practice, knowledge, involvement), see Table 3.

**Table 3** The different variables that constitute the “distance to the object” variable in the study of SR of cannabis (Dany & Abric, 2007)

<b>Distance to the object component</b>	<b>Number of variables</b>	<b>Names of variables</b>
Level of practice	3	Alcohol consumption Tobacco consumption Cannabis consumption Other illicit experimentation with drugs
Knowledge	1	Level of perceived knowledge about cannabis
Involvement	3	Knowing cannabis consumers Relation with the legal system concerning cannabis Planning to consume cannabis

In this study we observed specific and oriented regulations of SR dimensions depending on DO orientation. People who are close to cannabis activate, to a greater extent, the elements of the representation that relate to the effects expected from cannabis. These effects are related to personal experience and to sociability (e.g. cannabis allows you to “forget problems”, “have fun”, “relax” or “meet friends”). People who are considered as distant to cannabis activate, to a greater extent, the elements associated with the pharmacological and social danger of cannabis (e.g. “Cannabis is a dangerous drug for health”, “You can become addicted to cannabis”).

A second study on the SR of cocaine (Dany, Apostolidis, & Harabi, 2014) validated these previous results. The “closer” individuals are to cocaine, the more they activate the functional elements of the SR of cocaine (i.e. performance, festive), the more "distant" they are, the more they activate the normative elements of the SR of cocaine (i.e. health and social danger).

The results of these two studies highlight the fact that the Distance to the Object maintains a link with the socio-cognitive structure of the two SRs investigated. Specifically, the

distance specifies the psychosocial issues associated with the "positioning" of individuals vis-à-vis cannabis and cocaine. Individuals value some representational dimensions, in accordance with their distance. In other words, the distance is "finalised" (Blin, 1997), and is related to the transformation of the reality in which the subject is situated. In other words, DO is not an artefact of the link to the object, it is significant of the relationship between the object of the representation and the positioning of individuals and groups in term of distance. In the case of cannabis and cocaine, the differential activation of the representational dimensions can be seen as a process of risk negotiation, which is particularly important when groups are faced with risky behaviours or counter-normative experiences (see Apostolidis & Dany, 2012; Dany, 2015; Peretti-Watel, 2003).

### **Some challenges for the future**

To conclude this contribution, we want to suggest some directions for developing the concept of DO. For us, some challenges concern, for example, the process of construction of the DO, the implication between perceived and real knowledge, the question of segmentation and the position of individuals and groups, and the dynamic of SR in connection with DO.

*The construction of the DO* - The DO is not a "given" but is the "product" (selection and validation of the various components) of the researcher's activities. The old questions, concerning the part of reality "objectified" by the researcher are salient in this context. Thus, from the perspective of analysis of the subject's relationship to the object, there is concern that it is accompanied by a certain reductionism of the complexity of relationships explored. One may ask, for example, how the various variables used to develop each DO index are representative of the concept. In the future, it will be important to develop a clear and validated framework for the

development of DO variables.

*Perceived versus real knowledge concerning the object*<sup>6</sup> - Current research uses a measure of perceived knowledge for building the DO. One way of measuring the level of knowledge might be to ask participants whether they think that they have less, more, or the same level of knowledge as others. The objective will assess the level of knowledge by referring the participants to a common frame. Another option is to examine the role of objective knowledge in addition to perceived knowledge. Recent studies indicate that results are close to previous results (see Boussocco et al., 2015; Urdapilleta, Dany, Boussoco, Schwartz, & Giboreau, in press). Finally, the development of theoretical insights is necessary in order to better distinguish between knowledge (perceived, real) and the social knowledge produced in relation to the object (i.e. SR).

*Segmentation, reflexivity and the position of individuals and groups* - As we pointed out previously, according to the concept of DO, each individual can be positioned regarding their own degree of distance to the social object. In this sense, DO can offer a way of analysing "segmentation" (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). In other words, DO can elucidate, "How do we specify appropriate social segments for the study of social representations?" (p. 176). This segmentation can be performed *ex-post facto* by taking into account the outcome of the study. Furthermore, we hypothesize that position is not totally transparent for individuals and groups; communications and interactions help them to analyse and delimit their own position. The experience of an "other" whose perspective on the world is different constitutes a condition of reflexivity (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). In other words, "it's through the contact with conflicting social representations that human beings begin to reflect on their own views and realise what is distinctive about the

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the conception of involvement in DO approach, see Dany & Abric (2007).

representations they hold" (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005, p. 438). From this perspective, we think that reflexivity (as an experience of an "other") can help us to analyse segmentation and the anticipation of the other segments or positions.

*DO and the dynamic of SR* - The concept of DO can be a heuristic way of studying the dynamics of SR. DO may be a relevant indicator for understanding the different "facets" of change introduced by the external conditions which individuals and groups face and in which they participate. In this context, the notion of distance could be a route for considering the epistemological limits highlighted by Deconchy (1993) concerning the contradictions that may be encountered between the "representational register" and the "praxeological register".

DO was developed in order to pursue further the trend of studying practice as performance in empirical research in the field of social representations (Schatzki, 1996). This notion refers to the carrying out of practices and the performance of doings and sayings which "actualise and sustain practices in the sense of nexuses" (Warde, 2005). Whatever the nature of the questions which are still unanswered, the concept of Distance to the Object initiated by Jean-Claude Abric has heuristic value for the understanding, via a broader and integrative "frame of reference", of the relationship that people have with objects of representation. The project of analysing the link to the object by distance places the object at the heart of knowledge production. I hope that these future works will help to develop Jean-Claude Abric's legacy.

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