The Cambridge Handbook of Social Representations

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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5 Researching social representations

Uwe Flick, Juliet Foster and Sabine Caillaud

The issue of methods in social representations theory has proved contentious for some time, although we would argue that the focus of this discussion has shifted in recent years. During the 1980s and 1990s much criticism centred on the supposed lack of focus on methods in early considerations of social representations, and an alleged methodological polytheism (Jahoda, 1988): some critics suggested that an 'anything goes' attitude to methods would only serve to weaken the theory, and argued that researchers needed greater guidance as to how to 'do' social representations research. Many of these concerns have been discussed at some length elsewhere (see, for example, Flick and Foster, 2008): as a theory, and not a method, the social representations approach aims to examine the ways in which individuals within social groups make sense of the world around them, and how these understandings change, develop, interact and so on. The methods that can be used in order to examine these research questions will, as in any social science research, vary, and must be considered carefully on each occasion in order to ensure that the most appropriate methods are used. Indeed, it could even be argued that there are different ways of defining social representations within the developing theory, and different aspects of representations on which to focus, and so multiplicity in methods and analysis is not only inevitable, but preferable (Bauer and Gaskell, 1999). This chapter illustrates this point.

Similarly, more work has now discussed the issue of approaching methods in social representations theory in more depth, providing the researcher with more guidance (see, for example, Bauer and Gaskell, 1999; Breakwell and Canter, 1993; Wagner and Hayes, 2005). However, concerns now focus more on problematic aspects of the use of particular kinds of methods, rather than on a lack of relevant discussion. For example, social representations studies continue to take both qualitative and quantitative approaches: should this be an issue of concern, or something to be encouraged? Another issue concerns the role of the researcher in social representations studies. Later in this chapter we hope to address these issues, among others, in more depth.

Levels of analysis: relating theory to method

Many studies now routinely consider the way that representations develop and circulate at different levels: Duveen and Lloyd (1990) argued that