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Gabriel Mugny and Felice Carugati

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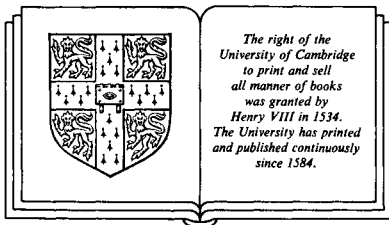
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Preface

Intelligence, if such a thing exists, is the historical creation of a particular culture, analogous to the notion of childhood (Ariès, 1973; Chombart de Lauwe, 1979). The old idea that it is a singular entity is no longer tenable: we have to recognise the plurality of the concept (Château, 1983; Verolié and Castello, 1984). This acknowledgement that intelligence is polysemous, and obviously social in origin, leads naturally on to studying the social representations of intelligence. In fact, as Goodnow (1984) has emphasised, a change in our perspective today is essential: we need to stop thinking of intelligence as a quality possessed by individuals, in varying degrees, and recognise it for what it actually is: a value-judgement, a label, slapped on everybody who happens to have (or not to have) the characteristics regarded as typical of an intelligent person. A semantic change of this sort opens up a new perspective, in which intelligence, instead of being regarded as a quality *per se*, can be seen as an attribute, admittedly socially necessary, which is culturally and historically determined, and therefore as liable to vary between the sub-groups of a single society as from one latitude to another. In short, intelligence needs to be defined socially (Doise and Mugny, 1984) so as to account for the origin of the social issues involved in its measurement, those 'natural' divisions (Moscovici, 1968) which persist even into socialist societies with their claims of classlessness. The 'epistemic subject' of the work of Piaget and the Piagetians appears, perhaps now more than ever, to be a chimera.

How are we to escape from this impasse? Rather than looking for the answer in the development of scientific conceptions of intelligence or of the workings of the intellect (see Sternberg, 1982; Fry, 1984a), we have deliberately chosen to investigate the social representations of intelligence, or in other words ordinary, everyday attitudes to intelligence, which are often less naïve than they appear. This approach is fully justified, given a recognition that conceptions of intelligence are actually social constructions, with a multiplicity of significances which, as we shall hope to show, are related to different social integrations. In the end, we should at least be in a better position to distinguish between myth and reality in the notion of intelligence (Salvat, 1976).

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The social integrations which determine the social representations of intelligence (and its development, where applicable) are not related primarily, in our analysis, to the weighty sociological variables of age, sex, social class and so on, but derive instead from a socio-psychological approach which owes much to Serge Moscovici's work (1961, 1968) on social representations, defined as appropriate and legitimate objects of social psychology. Thus the trajectory of our research, guided partly by the hypotheses which governed our investigation, and partly by its results, leads us to a consideration of the socio-psychological foundations of representations of intelligence. We shall observe how a representation is constructed, similar to what we are accustomed to think of as the ideology of giftedness, and designed to domesticate the socio-cognitive unfamiliarity created by the differences in intelligence between individuals. It is a process, as we shall see, which implies some kind of information shortage and direct, significant experience of inter-individual differences of a sort typically found among parents (simply by virtue of being parents) and among teachers during the gradual process of socialisation into their chosen function. These are two of the adult socialisations – and we shall be looking at others as well – which have a determining effect on the development of representations of intelligence.

A word of caution is necessary at this point: some of these findings might seem to carry at least an implicit criticism of the socio-cognitive functions at work among both parents and teachers, to mention only those, for their continuing orientation to the ideology of giftedness. And it is certainly no part of our intention to play down this fact, which is self-evident. Nevertheless, one of the most significant aspects of this study is the way its results challenge some of our assumptions about adult psychology, and the forms of bias which govern our representations and our educational practices, especially those of teachers and parents. Our hope is that these results may contribute to a new collective awareness of socio-psychological determinants of adult growth or development which are frequently either overshadowed or unrecognised. We are not accusing either group, both of whom are already quite preoccupied enough with the problems involved in family, occupational and institutional integrations, as well as the daily difficulties of educating children; we want to collaborate in increasing the awareness of socio-cognitive mechanisms which, apparently quite naturally, attend the social representations which we conjure up for the world and for ourselves

Acknowledgements

This study forms part of a research programme currently being carried out at Geneva in collaboration with Willem Doise and Gabrielle Poeschl and is one of a number of additional products of the close international collaboration under the research agreement between the universities of Bologna and Geneva. A preliminary survey of the results was presented to the symposium on 'Le rappresentazioni sociali: campi di indagine teorica ed empirica' at Bologna in December 1983, and to the international conference at Geneva on 'Les représentations sociales de l'intelligence et de son développement' in June 1984; both these meetings were organised jointly by our respective universities and the Laboratoire Européen de Psychologie Sociale de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris. The present book has benefited greatly from the critical discussion stimulated by these meetings. Our analysis was presented and discussed in a more definitive form at the symposium on 'Social and parental representations of intelligence and development' which took place at the 8th Congress of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development, in Tours, in July 1985.

This project has been a long one, starting in the summer of 1982, and could not have been completed without the help of a large number of people, the most important of whom are the individuals who agreed to complete the lengthy questionnaire; we are extremely grateful to them for their perseverance. We have been aided in our task in Bologna by Vittorio Biagini, Gabriella Gavelli, Adele Lombardini, Marco Minghetti and Patrizia Selleri, in Neuchâtel by Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont and Jean-François Perret, and in Geneva by Alessandra Bassetti, Jean-Pierre Gachoud, Simona Grattini, Carmen Roca, Pierre Simond and Marie-Anne Vallet. To all of them we express our thanks.