An overview on Social Psychology in Brazil: Theoretical contributions from the production of journals

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Abstract

This work aims at describing the set of Social Psychology theories that Brazilian researchers have been using, trying to understand the theoretical currents privileged when developing research. It surveyed the Social Psychology articles published in Psychology journals ranked by CAPES in 2012 as Qualis A1, A2 and B1, from 2007 to 2011. Sixteen journals were selected. These have published 3,501 articles in that period, of which 550 were classified as Social Psychology articles, based on the criteria defined. It was observed that 45% of the articles analyzed a social topic without resorting to the theoretical-conceptual framework of Social Psychology, while only 4% employed a methodological discussion. Thus, Social Psychology ends up by being characterized as a field that describes social affairs, phenomena that are relevant or emergent in the society, without more consistent advances in the theoretical or methodological light.

Keywords: Social Psychology; theory; bibliographic research.

Resumo

Um panorama da Psicologia Social no Brasil: aportes teóricos da produção em periódicos. Este trabalho visa descrever o conjunto de teorias da Psicologia Social com as quais os pesquisadores brasileiros têm trabalhado, buscando-se compreender quais as vertentes teóricas privilegiadas no desenvolvimento das pesquisas. Foram investigados os artigos de Psicologia Social publicados nos periódicos da área da Psicologia avaliados em 2012 pela CAPES com Qualis A1, A2 e B1 no período de 2007 a 2011. Foram selecionados 16 periódicos que, no período, publicaram 3.501 artigos dos quais 550 foram classificados como artigos de Psicologia Social a partir dos critérios definidos. Observou-se que 45% dos artigos analisavam um tema social sem recorrer ao arcabouço teórico-conceitual da Psicologia Social e apenas 4% dos artigos debruçavam-se sobre uma discussão metodológica. Assim, a Psicologia Social termina se caracterizando como um campo de descrição dos problemas sociais, dos fenômenos de relevância ou emergência na sociedade, sem um avanço mais consistente do ponto de vista teórico ou metodológico.

Palavras-chave: Psicologia Social; teoria; pesquisa bibliográfica.

This paper aims at describing the current Social Psychology as regards the set of theories being used by the Brazilian researchers. In other words, the purpose here is to understand which theoretical currents these Brazilians privilege when developing their research.

A theory could be defined as a set of concepts and propositions articulated in a logical way, in order to classify and explain a set of phenomena (Moscovici, 1984) For Social Psychology, these theories aim at explaining phenomena that are, at the same time, psychological and social phenomena. The focus of studies in Social Psychology is the individual-society relation or, as Moscovici puts it, the conflict subject/society (the "inner" and the "outer" societies), even considering the diversity of theories regarding the nature of the phenomenon being studied, and the level of explanation intended by them, as well.

Firstly, it is worth highlighting that the nature of the Social Psychology theories widely varies. Putting it in another way, its explanative scope, the analyses to which it is targeted, vary in level.

Moscovici (1984) identifies three kinds of theory in Social Psychology: the paradigmatic, the phenomenological and the operatory theories. According to him, the paradigmatic theories would be those purporting a global view on the human relations and behaviors like, for example, Lewin's field theory.

The phenomenological theories, in turn, aim at explaining a body of phenomena like Sheriff's Social Influence theory, which analyzes how autonomous subjects converge towards a consensual judgment when subjected to the group pressure.

Finally, the operatory theories aim at explaining a set of facts connected to an elementary mechanism. An example of this kind of theory is found in the Cognitive Dissonance Theory which, when explaining the disturbance caused by contradictory cognitions and the pursuit for the consonance that would solve the anxiety caused by dissonance, has also explained the body of phenomena related to changes of attitude and behavior.

According to Moscovici (1984), the three kinds of theory co-exist in Social Psychology, but none could be identified in its "pure state," i.e., each one could be placed in more than one item. However, altogether, their logic specificity and its role in the study of phenomena are easily recognized.

Additionally to the diversity of theories nature in Social Psychology, it is also worth mentioning that these propose different levels of analysis. As highlighted by Doise (1982; 2002), Psychology in general, and Social Psychology specifically, proposes theoretical explanations that range from the intra-individual to the societal level. In a work dated 1980 that analyzed the articles published by the European Journal of Social Psychology, Doise emphasized the existence of four different levels of analysis in the Social Psychology inquiries.

The first set gathered the works that analyzed intra-individual processes, i.e., tried to explain how individuals organize their experiences with environment. This first level pools 46% of the explanations found in the first editions of the European Journal. The inquiries on cognitive balance are typical to this level (Doise, 2002).

Another level of explanation focuses on inter-individual and situational processes. Here individuals are considered to be exchangeable and the interaction systems provide the explanative principles typical to the dynamics at this level. The inquiries on communications networks are good illustrations of this level, just like the experiences with motivational games.

The third level of analysis highlighted by Doise (2002) was the positional one, i.e., the studies that analyzed the positions held by subjects in the society, and how these positions shaped both intra-individual and inter-individual/situational processes. He illustrates this level of analysis with the inquiries on groups of different status, dominators and dominated individuals, majority and minority groups.

Finally, the fourth level of analysis found by Doise (2002) deals with studies that refer to the systems of beliefs, representations, evaluations and social rules. At this level of analysis the cultural and ideological productions that characterize a given society or group not only assign meaning to the individuals' behaviors, but also create or support social differentiations on behalf of general principles. For example, on behalf of a genuine idea of justice, we consider that people have the destiny they deserve (p.28).

Doise (2002) advocates for the idea that research in Social Psychology should necessarily resort to these four levels of analysis if it intends to explain the individual-society relations. Social Psychology should be aimed at showing how individuals possess processes that enable them working in society and, in a supplementary way, how social dynamics - notably the interactional, positional or dynamics of values and beliefs in general - guide the working of such processes.

For Brazil, the preference for different levels of analysis could be understood based on the historical context in which Social Psychology was developed in the country.

Until late in the 1970's, Social Psychology played a modest role in the production of knowledge about Psychology in Brazil, as noted by Ferreira (2010, p. 59).

The earliest Brazilian publications focusing on the analysis of psychosocial issues started in the 1930's (Bonfim, 2003) However, Social Psychology would not be institutionalized before 1962, when the Federal Psychology Council, through the Opinion 403/62, established the official curriculum to Psychology courses, making Social Psychology a mandatory subject.

By that time, the intra- and inter-individual analyses prevailed, using experimental methods. In 1972, Aroldo Rodrigues launched the first edition of the book on Social Psychology that highly impacted the education of psychologists and the production of research in the country (Ferreira, 2010). From late in the 1970's to the 1980's, however, the Brazilian Social Psychology starts undergoing a change that implied a rupture with the Social Psychology limited to the intra- and inter-individual analysis of the subject-society relation, challenging the concept of science and of "social" in force by that time. It sought for a more "social" Psychology, i.e., a Psychology more committed to the economically disadvantaged layers or, in other words, greater political commitment of the scientific knowledge to the fights for re-democratizing the country, as highlighted by Torres and Alvaro (2013).

By that time, part of the Brazilian Social Psychology approached a social-historical perspective, in opposition to the individual nature of the analysis produced by Social Psychology up to then, in an attempt to recover the historical and social aspects of the construction of the subject, aiming at a societal analysis of the subject-society relation. In Brazil, Silvia Lane, Social Psychology professor and researcher at PUC in São Paulo, heads this movement and articulates the creation of ABRAPSO (Brazilian Association of Social Psychology), which meets for the first time in 1980 (Cruz & Van Stralen, 2012). In that same year, Lane (1980, p. 97) publishes an article that proposes a redefinition of Social Psychology that would imply a "review of the whole conceptual system (…)," since Social Psychology should leave its biological tradition and "assume a historical dimension in the analysis of psychosocial facts" (p. 96). That means focusing on the significant contents of behaviors rather than being restricted to behaviors, i.e., instead of describing, for example, how learning happens, try to understand what is learned, in which social conditions it happens, and what that learning means in the body of social relations that concretely defines the individual in the society where they live in (Lane, 1980, p. 96)

Additionally to the theoretical rupture, as also stressed out by Torres and Alvaro (2013), the experimental method researchers were secluded, and there was a strong tendency toward using

research-action and research-participant.

According to Lane (1980), the importance of research would lay in the relevance of the facts studies, and in the possibility of systematizing the knowledge that would necessarily lead others to think over and act to cause social changes. Social Psychology should play the role of "critical consciousness" of Psychology.

That perspective had an impact on the development of research in Social Psychology in Brazil and, as stated by Ferreira (2010) when analyzing the main theoretical trends and perspectives of Social Psychology in Latin America, Europe and the United States, the Latin American researchers – including the Brazilians – prefer adopting the Critical Social Psychology approach. However, the author emphasizes that the Brazilian production also comprises theories focused on individual psychological processes, using the experimental method, as well as theories aimed at investigating the psychosocial processes underlying the intra- and inter-group relations using experimental and non-experimental methods.

This work intends to understand, within these major trends, which are the main theoretical currents employed by the Brazilian researchers in the field of Social Psychology. To that, it tried to: (1) identify the theories that grounded scientific production in the field, in the last five years; (2) analyze the articulations established with the remainder fields of Psychology, as well as with other fields of knowledge.

Method

When trying to learn the different theories used by the Brazilian researchers, some decisions had to be made to enable the development of this work.

Firstly, it was decided to survey only the national journals in the field of Psychology that were evaluated by CAPES in 2012 with Qualis A1, A2 and B1. Then, it was decided that all editions of the selected journals published in the last 05 years (from 2007 to 2011) would be analyzed, since the year of 2012 was still underway. The third decision concerned the definition on what is and what is not an article on Social Psychology. Most of the Brazilian scientific journals are generalist, i.e., publish articles in all fields of Psychology. Thus, we decided to analyze all articles bearing in the title, abstract, objectives or key words some concept or theory related to Social Psychology found in Social Psychology handbooks, or declared by the author (s) to be a Social Psychology work. The criterion for selecting the articles in this survey was a list with the main constructs, theories and concepts of Social Psychology. The only exception was the *Psicologia e Sociedade* journal that bears an editorial proposal of publishing articles in the field of Social Psychology. All the articles of that journal were analyzed.

Altogether, 16 journals were selected. In that period, these have published 3,501 articles, excluding summaries, news, reports on experiences, interviews, editorials and special editions, as well as articles produced by foreign institutions. Of that total, 550 articles that met the criteria established were selected, accounting for 15.7% of the articles published in those journals from 2007 to 2011 (Table 1).

On average, the journals analyzed have issued 16 editions for that period. Except for the *Psicologia e Sociedade*, the journal that published more articles in the area was *Psicologia em Estudo* (Maringá), with 38 articles from 2007 to 2011, while to the *Mal-estar e Subjetividade* only three articles were identified for that period, making this the journal that published the shortest

Table 1

Journals, Qualis Evaluation, Number of Editions and Number of Articles Analyzed

Journal	Qualis	Number of editions	Number of articles selected*
Psicologia: Reflexão e crítica	A1	16	32
Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa	A1	20	28
Paidéia	A1	15	28
Arquivos Brasileiros de Psicologia	A2	13	16
Estudos de Psicologia (Natal)	A2	15	24
Estudos de Psicologia (PUCCAMP)	A2	20	33
Interação em Psicologia	A2	9	10
Psicologia e Sociedade	A2	15	227
Psicologia em Estudo (Maringá)	A2	19	38
Psicologia Ciência e Profissão	A2	20	26
Revista de Psicologia: Teoria e Prática	A2	13	30
Fractal: Revista de Psicologia*	B1	12	12
Psico UFS	B1	13	21
Psicologia USP	B1	20	8
Revista Mal-estar e Subjetividade	B1	17	3
Psico (PUCCRS)	B1	19	14
Total		**256**	**550**

* The editions from 2007 of the Fractal journal were unavailable by the time of collection.

number of articles on Social Psychology.

Please find below a chart illustrating (Figure 1) the distribution of the selected journals, based on the ranking of their respective Qualis.

In principle, we have selected the articles abstracts. However, many times the information therein was insufficient, i.e., missed reference to the theoretical field used, to the objectives or to the articulation with Social Psychology. Thus, many times we had to read the whole article to make a more consistent analysis. Nonetheless, in some cases we could not identify some pieces of information, like concepts/theories of Social Psychology, and articulation with fields of knowledge.
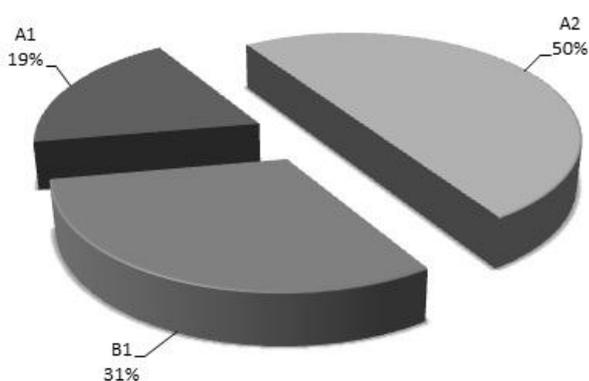

Figure 1
Percentage of distribution of journals analyzed based on Qualis (N = 16).

Results and discussion

To guide the finds presentation, two discussion axes were established, namely: (1) theoretical-conceptual field intended to explain which approaches, concepts and theories were more present in these productions; and, (2) articulation of fields of knowledge to outline with which fields of work in Social Psychology it has articulated more frequently.

1) *Theoretical-conceptual field.* Out of all the articles analyzed, 31% failed in disclosing the theory that grounded the work, or had theoretical grounds in other fields of Psychology or similar areas. Among the articles that claimed using Social Psychology theories or concepts, some approaches, concepts and theories were more quoted in the Brazilian production in the last five years, as shown in Figure 2.

The studies on social representation (18%), perception (8.9%), constructionism/discursive psychology (6%), beliefs, rules and values (5.5%), identity (5.4%), discrimination/prejudice/stereotypes (4%), attitudes (3.3%), and the so-called "historical-cultural Psychology" (2.4%) are the most representative ones. In principle, such distribution seems to show a balance between individual approaches (22.8%) of Social Psychology, and approaches aimed at levels of the inter-individual, positional and societal analysis (34.8%).

When we make a deeper analysis, we can perceive that

some of these concepts/theories are only quoted in the text. For example, among the 49 articles aimed at inquiring the perception on some object or happening, only 9 are theoretically grounded on social perception. Three of these try to validate scales, while 37 articles only mention the term "perception," disregarding the theoretical-scientific production on social perception. There is no reference to the classic works by Asch, Heider, or to the latest production on social perception, for example, in the perspective of social cognition. The data analysis is restricted to describing reports and the individuals' reasoning on a given topic. However, the articles studied seem to be more focused on the object perceived than on the perception of the object.

Other concepts and theories like attitudes, social interaction / interpersonal relations and social representations, for example, reported similar situation. Many times the researcher focuses the analysis on a societal level, stressing out the ideological aspects or social rules related to the object, failing in establishing links to the psychological processes involved. There is no relation to the other levels of analysis highlighted by Doise (1982; 2002).

The analysis of these articles have also allowed for ranking them according to the "focus of work," i.e., in some articles the data analysis were based on a Social Psychology theoretical benchmark, or dealt with a discussion on the research methods used in this field. In other texts, however, the discussion focused on the topic of research, with no reference to the Social Psychology concepts or theories. Thus, the articles analyzed have been classified in three different categories, as follows:

Theoretical-conceptual: articles where the links to Social Psychology were justified and/or theoretically-conceptually located. This category also includes articles where the object of discussion is the field of Social Psychology itself, based on well-founded historical and epistemological readings.

Topic: articles where theories and concepts of Social Psychology are only mentioned without serving as reference guide to the data analysis. Theoretical foundation and data discussion are based on the research topic. For example, when studying the attitude of a given group towards health, the theoretical grounds and data analysis are based on the knowledge produced on health, and there is no mention to attitude.

Method: articles that, although using concepts and theoretical currents of Social Psychology, intended to foster a methodological discussion or introduce procedures to validate specific tools.

As shown in Figure 3, most of the articles analyze were classified as Theoretical-conceptual (51%) and Thematic (45%), accounting for 96% of the data collected. The remainder 4% gathers those articles classified as methodological.

The first issue that catches our attention is the low percentage of articles devoted to methodological discussion. Despite the large number of tools and methodological proposals found in the Brazilian surveys, researchers seem to fail in theorizing about the method, think it over, and investigate the use of different methods in their research.

Moreover, a little more than half of the 550 articles analyzed use the Social Psychology concepts or theories in a systematic and well-founded way. However, the fact that 45% of the articles were classified as thematic raises some important questions. In
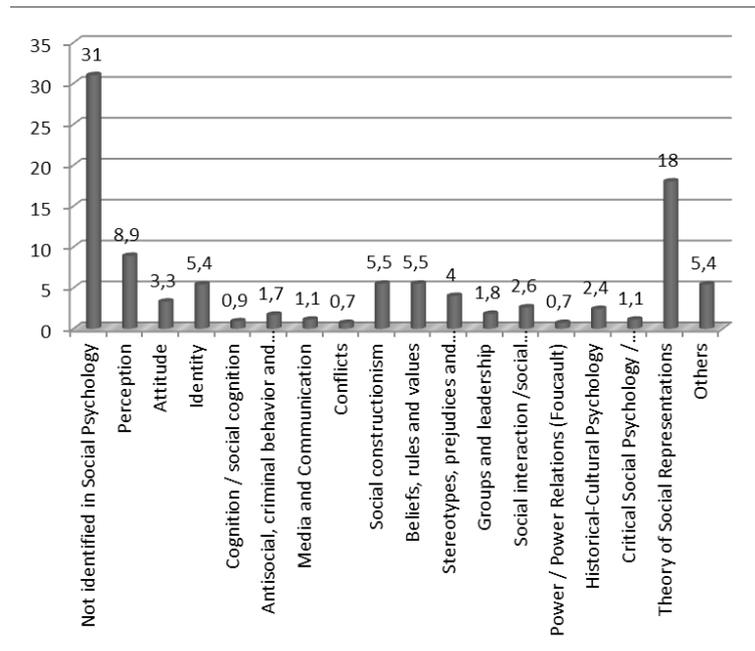
Figure 2
Theoretical concepts of reference to articles (*N* = 550).

fact, many times we find works that emphasize the social nature of the theme, either for its cultural relevance, interactive nature, or its character of social construction. These are some arguments used to place works in the field of Social Psychology. Therefore, would the characteristics of the object studied be sufficient to characterize a given production as a study in Social Psychology? Working on a social theme would mean one is making Social Psychology?

The concern underlying this question is the fact that many times scientific productions make uncontrolled use of concepts, or miss a theoretical framework that would allow for working on such concepts. This remark neither means proposing a "theoretical-conceptual technicality," nor restricts the notions of the science being worked; rather, it points out the possibility of producing consistent knowledge without losing criticism. Appraising a theoretical-conceptual construction does not necessarily mean proposing scientific neutrality, neither seeking "the" reality through science. On the contrary, it means facilitating dialogue between different productions, keeping
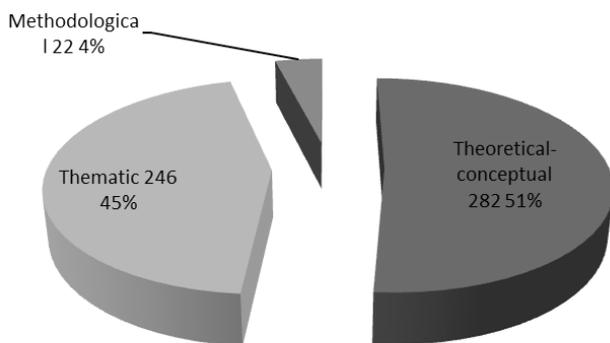
their theoretical specificities, and delimiting the field of study.

Among these articles, some topics are outstanding. The graph below (Figure 4) discloses the prevalent topics. It is worth noticing that topics widely vary in the remainder articles. When considering "attitude" and "perception" as topics, it included only the articles aimed at dealing with the attitude or perception of a given group on any social object, but disregarded the knowledge produced about attitude or perception produced in Social Psychology.
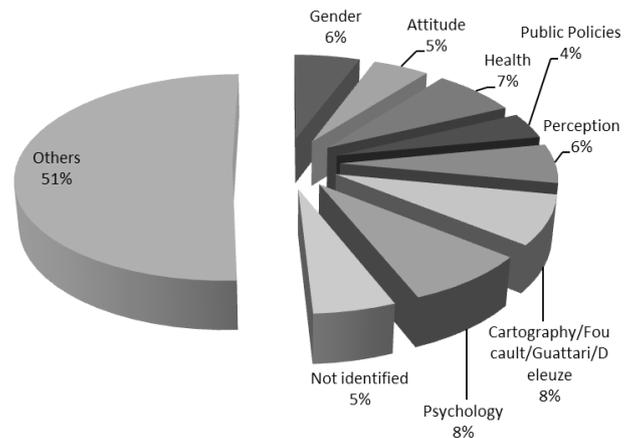

Figure 4
Distribution of articles not articulated to the theoretical concepts of Social Psychology according to topics studied.

Figure 3
Distribution of articles regarding the work focus (*N* = 550).

The works on attitude, identity and interpersonal relations are also divided, on one hand, in studies with theoretical grounds in Social Psychology and, on the other hand, studies focused exclusively on the topic under study. One should notice that the topics here are topics of social interest, like illness, health,

inclusion, etc. Similar results were found by Ferreira (2010) when analyzing Social Psychology articles in six A1 and A2 journals, available at the Scielo database.

These data seem to reflect a major concern of the Brazilian researchers about clarifying or contributing to solve social problems, rather than to the theoretical development or the development of methodological strategies that fit better the investigation supported by several Social Psychology theories.

When referring to the theoretical development of the so-called Critical Social Psychology, Ferreira (2010) highlighted that there are few studies in this theoretical perspective where one finds the concern about formulating concepts, methodologies or innovative theoretical models, capable of placing the Brazilian Critical Social Psychology in a leading position in the Latin-American, North-American or European scene. (The same remark seems to fit into other theoretical trends of the Brazilian Social Psychology.

2) *Articulation with Psychology and other fields of knowledge.* Among the articles selected, only 28.7% reported articulations with other areas of Psychology (Figure 5) More than half of these were related to Occupational (24%), Development (21%), Education (15%) and Clinical (11%) Psychologies. Additionally to these areas, the works produced in Sports Psychology, Forensic Psychology, Health Psychology, among others, are also worth of notice.
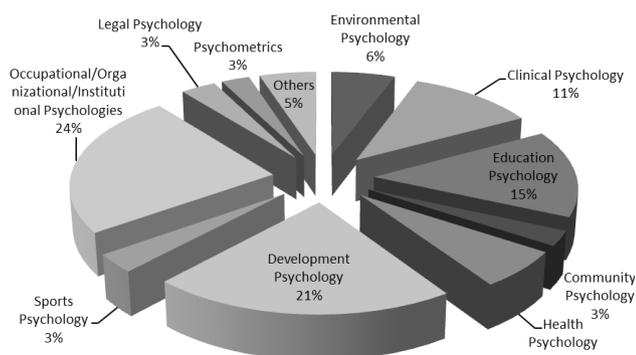

Figure 5
Percentage of articles regarding the main areas of Psychology.

The main concepts/theories articulated to the fields of Occupational, Development and Clinical Psychologies are as follows: attribution of causality; self-esteem; interpersonal attraction; antisocial and criminal behavior; values; beliefs; perception; attitudes; social identity; social constructionism; and, social representations. Therefore, there is a wide range of Social Psychology concepts used in the dialogue with other fields of the psychological knowledge.

Some few articles were identified in the field of Family, Institutional, Narrative Psychologies, Ethno-psychology and General Psychology. However, despite self-referring as Social Psychology, no concept or theory articulating with the field could be identified.

Additionally to other areas of Psychology, works articulating with other fields of knowledge were also identified. Among these,

the most frequent ones were: Health (16%) – notably production in the field of Public Health (41%) and Mental Health (25%); Education (8%); History, Sociology and Psychoanalysis (3%); Gender, Anthropology, Law, Philosophy and Medical Sciences (2%); Psychopathology, Media, Public Policies, Abuse of Alcohol and other Drugs, and Technology (1%).

In 48% of the production no articulation was found with other fields of knowledge. The percentage of productions dialoguing with other areas of knowledge (51%) was higher than that for works articulating with other areas of Psychology (29%).

Final remarks

The first aspect that should be highlighted is the difficulty in identifying the production in Social Psychology. On one hand, defining a work in Social Psychology based on a body of theories and concepts acclaimed in literature brings the risk of failing in making room to the new. Some of the theories and concepts that are now renowned, one day were aside what used to be called as Social Psychology in different moments of history. On the hand, the works self-referred as production in Social Psychology sometimes miss attributes to be fit into the theoretical body of the subject and, many times, use a concept formulated by some Social Psychology theory, but without the proper theorization. In other cases, the relation between the topic studied and the theoretical body of Social Psychology (or even of Psychology) is not stated. In this sense, it is worth quoting Professor Celso Sá, when he recalls in different occasions that Social Psychology is not done only with Psychology, but Social Psychology can neither be done without Psychology.

Hence, one can find some productions in the field of Social Psychology that are not clearly presented. This opaqueness seems to be originated in the way how theories are being used. Generally speaking, many productions inform readers about the use of a given theory, but do not use it to guide the analysis of the data presented. This standard is frequently observed in the works analyzed, and is not limited to one or another theory. Thus, the Social Psychology ends up by being characterized as a field that describes the social affairs, phenomena that are relevant to or emergent in the society, without more consistent advances in the theoretical our methodological light that could characterize a Brazilian Social Psychology.

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Footnote

1. This paper ensues from a research work developed by all the authors, under the guidance of Professor Maria de Fátima de Souza Santos. Therefore, the Professor is indicated as the main author and the remainder authors follow in alphabetical order, although the level of contribution is the same.

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