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Mario von Cranach, Willem Doise  
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# Social Representations and the Social Bases of Knowledge

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## Social Impact of Experts and Minorities, and Smoking Cessation \*

Juan Antonio Pérez and Gabriel Mugny

### The routes of persuasion

Recent studies on persuasion argue that two routes of attitude change are possible: one more "peripheral", the other more "central" (cf. Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Zanna, Olson and Herman, 1987). In the same vein, our model of the process of social influence (Mugny and Pérez, 1991) presupposes two distinct processes in attitudinal or behavioural changes. One, more typical of high psychosocial status sources (majority, experts, etc...) is based on *social comparison*, either on the psychosocial resources respective to the source and the target, or on social identification, and accounts for the phenomena of uniformity and conformity. The other, more typical of minorities and less credible sources, is founded on a *sociocognitive validation* (Moscovici, 1980), that, starting from a decenteration relative to the dominant normative point of view and taking into account divergent points of view, leads to the constructive elaboration of a new attitude or behaviour. In this contribution, we will develop the articulation of these two processes relevant to an issue of which the social, or even individual importance is obvious: smoking.

Our recent studies in the field of persuasion and communication research are concerned with how individuals generate specific persuasive appeals and how these appeals influence other people. We started this line of research with the observation that the antismoking campaigns (since the purpose, from a social influence perspective, is to change the behaviour of smokers) resort mainly to messages from expert sources. They probably do that as they rest on the "naive psychology" or beliefs, i.e. on social representations, about the most effective tactics for persuading others (Kule and Bisanz, 1987). One of the dominant beliefs is that the efficiency of influence strategies is based on expertise; specifically, the legitimacy

point of view, it is not sure whether expertise has a guaranteed social impact.

Our idea approaching this problem from the validation process point of view, from which we know that it is initiated by conflicts of an optimum intensity, was that a change could stem from confronting smokers to a message defending a new, uncommon and even counter-normative argument. If the critical information would come from a minority, i.e. from a source with low credibility, the question would then be: could we not envisage the conflict to be handled via the process of validation? Under such an appearance, cognitive activity on the persuasive information would be carried out at more in-depth levels, which would lead to the elaboration of a normative dilemma bringing the smokers to adopt a new attitude and behaviour towards their smoking habits. Let us now look at some of the experimental studies that have dealt with this problem.

### Some experimental evidence

Rather than putting forth a message calling for the "objective reality", argumenting facts of legitimate knowledge (about health or ecology for example), in several experiments (cf. Pérez, Mugny, Roux and Buiera, 1991), we confronted the smokers with a normative minority argument, expressing a "left-wing" stance not frequently heard of, and denouncing the vicious circle of production-publicity-consumption, in which the smoker is represented as a free spinning wheel in a gear, unaware but active. This way of accusing the smoker in a socio-political way is an unusual argument, and has been perceived as such at the same time as pertaining to a minority, and being rigid and conflicting. To test our hypothesis, and according to various conditions, we have attributed these arguments either to an expert ("professionals in political economy") or to a minority source ("militants of a minority group"). This way, we can evaluate the impact of a highly credible source and of a source with no legitimate scientific foundation: our initial hypothesis being that the minority identity of the source should specifically focus the target's attention on the content of the normative debate. As for the results, we will limit ourselves here to changes in the intention to quit smok-

ing. That is, in the tradition of studies on influence and persuasion, the intention of stopping smoking is taken twice (on a 7-point scale); firstly before reading the message, and then a second time thereafter. Before looking at the main results, let us note that the credible source is perceived, ad hoc measures controlling them, as more expert, scientific and objective, and of course as pertaining more to a majority, than the minority source.

In a first experiment we looked at the degree of immunisation smokers have to a message that questions their smoking habits. To do this we constituted two groups of smokers: those who, resulting from a dilemma in the pretest, gave more importance to the freedom of smoking, and those who gave more importance to the respect of the non-smokers. The first group has its rights, and is thus eager to defend its position. The social influence measures do not reveal a main effect of the expert or minority identity of the source, but a first degree interaction ( $p < 0.04$ ), their impact varying according to the type of smokers under consideration. First, the conflict induced by the minority was, as predicted, more favourable to initiate a change, but only for the smokers most anchored in their position, and the most oriented towards the defence of their own rights ( $m = +0.22$ ). One can observe that it is difficult to influence them through what we have considered as an expert manner ( $m = -0.23$ ). The more they feel the pressure to change, i.e. to conform to the legitimate discourse of the dominant source, the stronger they would maintain their independence and protect their identity threatened by the power struggle separating them. On the other hand, when the initial attitudes of the targets suppose some shared value with the source, i.e. when smokers give more importance to the respect of the non-smokers, the attitude becomes "polarized" through the social comparison with the expert source ( $m = +0.13$ ), but does not change in front of the minority ( $m = -0.56$ ). For these subjects there is no need for conflictual arguments, but rather a positive social relationship with the source, to which they can attach positively the new attitude, to consolidate the new identity that it implies. In a nutshell, a legitimate knowledge can also be convincing, but according to the route of social comparison; a source with low credibility can

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also be convincing, but through a validation process. In a second study we have confirmed this interaction ( $p < .005$ ) by distinguishing, on the basis of their initial intention to stop smoking expressed in the pre-test, the subjects more or less "convinced" of their tobacco consumption. The results have shown that in front of an expert source, subjects who already expressed the intention to change their behaviour, change more ( $m = -0.23$ ; minority:  $m = -0.96$ ), whereas in front of the minority source the more convinced smokers were the most influenced ( $m = +1.31$ ; experts:  $m = +0.58$ ). Reasoning in terms of how people deal with the conflict, one could consider that the subjects closer to the source, from a psychological point of view, would consider more positively the argument of the source and would approach the influence situation via the social comparison route. It is the positivity of the comparison, guaranteed by the high credibility of the discourse, that would provoke the change. Here we would be in a phase where the change, having already started if one considers the initial declared intention, rests on a psychological community between targets and sources highly valued due to their expertise. For the subjects initially reluctant to stop their habit of consuming tobacco, the impossibility of a positive comparison is of no doubt, due to the high perceived discrepancy with the counter-normative discourse. Change is not to be expected via social comparison, for this one would render the opposition more salient. These subjects only change in front of a particularly conflictual source, such as a minority, that would activate a validation process.

In a third experiment, the message against tobacco was presented as receiving social support of a large majority, or of a small minority, either of smokers, or non-smokers. As suggested by the interaction between these two variables ( $p < .06$ ), two conditions were, according to our hypothesis, relatively more influential: the in-group majority of smokers ( $m = +0.25$ ; majority of non smokers:  $m = -1.00$ ), and the minority of non-smokers ( $m = -0.38$ ; minority of smokers:  $m = -0.92$ ). We find once again that once a psychological community between targets and sources exists, these then take advantage of the legitimacy of their message, founded here on consensus. Whereas,

Information. All this contradicts the general belief (probably a dominant social representation of the influence processes) according to which experts can convince thanks to the value of their arguments.

This is illustrated by another experiment (Pérez, Moscovici and Mugny, à paraître). Subjects, all smokers, were exposed to the usual anti-tobacco arguments, attributed to an expert source or a minority. They were then asked to write down either critical arguments *against the content* of the text only, or characteristics going *against the authors* of the text only. Following instructions, they wrote in average more than four arguments or characteristics. Social approval was also measured, in asking them to express their agreement with various ideas defended in the persuasive message. Analysis reveals a main effect: subjects who have criticized the content of the message disagree more with the arguments of the message than those who have criticized the source, especially when it is a minority. This confirms that denial specifically reduces the approval of a minority source (Pérez et al, 1986).

Regarding social influence on the intention to quit smoking, we find an interaction between the anti-tobacco's message source and the target of the critical activity ( $p < .01$ ). As predicted, the minority group induces more change when targets focus their critical attention on the content of the message ( $m = +0.79$ ) rather than on the characteristics of its authors ( $m = +0.02$ ). The reverse is true for the expert source, which induces more change when the critical activity is focussed on the characteristics ( $m = +0.78$ ) than when it is focussed on the content of the message ( $m = +0.24$ ).

An a posteriori division of subjects according to whether they propose more (at least three) or less arguments or characteristics, further illustrates this double dynamic. When the critical activity concerns the attributes of the source, subjects indicating more negative characteristics change less ( $m = 0.00$ ) than those who indicated less negative characteristics ( $m = +0.97$ ). The less one criticizes the source, the more one changes. This effect is particularly obvious for the subjects criticizing the less the highly credible source ( $m = +1.60$ ), confirming the effects of psychologization on the influence of higher status sources (Papastamou, 1986). When criticism addresses

the content of the message, subjects who write the greater number of counter-arguments change their intention to stop smoking ( $m = +0.90$ ) more than those who write less ( $m = +0.22$ ). This effect is stronger for the minority ( $m = +1.12$ ), confirming the paradoxical effects of denial.

**Conclusion**

Whether as a function of the degree of immunisation in the face of non-smokers, the initial discrepancy between source and target, the possible identification with the source, the in(ter)dependence of the judgements, or the nature of countering, the same pattern of influence appears. For targets psychologically closer to the source, social influence is a function of positive relationship, and depends on the legitimacy of its expert knowledge. Conversely, for more distant subjects, the impact is a function of a more intense conflict that is provided by the minority identity of the source. The former would function through a social comparison process, the latter through a validation process. The point is that in an influence relationship, either a unique point of view can prevail, or several. A source exerting legitimate informational or normative pressure would take advantage of a compelling or constraining field, that insures its superiority and its positivity. Whereas it is under the condition that the management of the normative conflict operates in an open field that a minority source (or a source of little credibility) can induce a change via a validation process.

One cannot conclude from the above that the legitimacy of expert knowledge ensures more influence than the illegitimacy of sources a priori devoid of credibility. Both of them operate according to a specific process, and it is their insertion in a particular normative context that makes more or less probable their efficiency in the control of social behaviour. If these various routes of persuasion present a theoretical and integrative interest in a field of research which is particularly dynamic, it also constitutes a potentially pragmatic contribution for professionals of mass media campaigns (especially on health), which often produce the perverse effect of reinforcing strongly anchored behaviours, rather than changing them

**Which resistance?**

Studies on smoking cessation take place in a context of psychosocial resistance. Research on minority influence has shown the following double phenomenon: when the targets resist, focussing on the personal characteristics of minorities or their members, the minority impact is reduced (regarding effects of the psychologization, see Papastamou, 1986). However, when they resist, denying the credibility of the message content, the minority impact grows paradoxically (cf. Pérez, Mugny and Moscovici, 1986). Therefore, the content of the message would play a more important part than the characteristics of the source in front of a minority. The reverse would be true for an expert message, the characteristics of the source being more crucial than the provided

Gün R. Semin &amp; Monica Rubini

## 1. Introduction: the Cultural Relativity of the Category of Person

One of the central social and psychological categories is the "category of person" (Mauss, 1933; Sampson, 1985). The fact that there are fundamental differences in the cultural constitution of the category of the person has eluded psychological attention until recently. A closer inspection of historical, anthropological and recent cross-cultural research suggests that our notions of the person as a constitutive principle, in order to understand the individual and to predict and explain his/her behaviour, are culture specific and possibly even misleading. Our contemporary understanding of the terms "self", "identity" and "person" in the Western world is an historically and culturally "idiosyncratic" one. As Geertz (1979) pointed out:

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures (p. 229).

The currently prevailing Western notion of the individual as an isolated, separated and unique entity is the product of considerable historical change. Cherry (1967, p. 463), for example, highlights this point by examining the etymology of the concept of the individual. This concept, derived from the Latin *individuum* originally appears to have had a dual meaning. Cicero, using it in Democritus' sense, referred to it as an individual "atom", very much in today's sense. Tacitus, on the other hand, in the post-Christian period used it as meaning "inseparable", which is also how it was used in medieval theological argument referring

"to a person as inseparably involved in some group and representing that group. "Individual" meant an "inseparable unity", as in the "Holy and individual Trinity" or (as Milton used it) "the individual (= indivisible) Catholic Church". Even in the 17th Century, a husband and wife were "individual". It referred to a person, or thing, which had no separate existence apart from one another, or from the group." (Cherry, 1967, p. 463)

There are diverse social historical reasons which are advanced for the transformation of this understanding of the person to its current atomistic or ego-centred conception, which are beyond the scope of this contribution. These arguments, coming from literary, philosophical and social historical sources, date the origins of our present conception of the person around the 16th and 17th centuries and link it, among other things, to the emergence of social mobility, the growth of a bourgeois middle class, and the increasingly secular attitudes and questionings which arose with the becoming of "science".

Even a cursory examination of cross cultural work on conceptions of identity reveals that there are considerable divergences in the way in which identities are embedded in social relationships, along with how responsibilities for the actions of a person are attributed. Across and within societies, one finds that "personhood" or identity can be conceptualized as relative manifestations within a social organization. For example, one finds in a variety of societies that "the individual is born with his name and his social functions... The number of individuals, names, souls and roles is limited in the clan and the line of the clan is merely a collection (ensemble) of rebirths and deaths of individuals who are always the same" (Mauss, 1906, in Allen, 1986, p. 33). Recent cross-cultural research shows, for example, that in India, as in various other cultures, there are distinctly holistic and thus relational cultural conceptions of the person, whereby the social role is treated as the primarily normative unit rather than the "individual" (see Miller, 1984;

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(see Roberts and Macoby, 1985). A first step to avoid such a perverse effect could consist in carefully questioning their social representations about the most effective tactics for persuading others.

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Rolf Arminann Dittlingerweg 10 CH – 3005 Bern	Willem Doise Université de Genève Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education 24, rue Général-Dufour CH – 1211 Genève 4
Joannis Avramakis Psychologisches Institut Universität Bern Laupenstrasse 4 CH – 3008 Bern	Francesca Emiliani Università degli Studi di Bologna Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Educazione Via Zamboni, 34 I – 40126 Bologna
Ernest E. Boesch Drosselweg 8 D – 6601 Scheidt-SB	August Fliammer Psychologisches Institut Universität Bern Laupenstrasse 4 CH – 3008 Bern
Felice Carugati Università degli Studi di Parma Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia Istituto di Psicologia Borgo Carissimi, 10 I – 43100 Parma	Uwe Flick Technische Universität Berlin Sekr. DO 303 Institut für Psychologie Dovestrasse 1–5 D – 1000 Berlin 10
Mario von Cranach Psychologisches Institut Universität Bern Gesellschaftsstrasse 49 CH – 3012 Bern	Michèle Grossen Université de Neuchâtel Faculté des Lettres Séminaire de Psychologie Espace Louis-Agassiz 1 CH – 2000 Neuchâtel
Hanns Peter Dachler Hochschule St. Gallen für Wirtschaftl., Rechts- und Sozialwissenschaften Guisanstrasse 12 CH – 9010 St. Gallen	Gerhard Kaminski Psychologisches Institut Universität Tübingen Friedrichstrasse 21 D – 7400 Tübingen
Hanns-Dietrich Dann Institut für Psychologie II Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg Erziehungswissenschaftliche Fakultät Regensburger Strasse 160 D – 8500 Nürnberg	Lenelis Kruse Psychologisches Institut Universität Heidelberg Hauptstrasse 47–51 D – 6900
Pierre R. Dasen Université de Genève Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education 24, rue Général-Dufour CH – 1211 Genève 4	Alfred Lang Psychologisches Institut Universität Bern Laupenstrasse 4 CH – 3008 Bern
Annamaria Silvana de Rosa Università degli Studi di Roma LA SAPIENZA Dipartimento di Psicologia dei Processi Sviluppo e Socializzazione Via dei Mursi, 78 I – 00185 Roma	Ivana Markova University of Stirling Department of Psychology Stirling FK9 4LA Scotland

## Introduction

This book results from a scientific undertaking, the main aim of which was to explore the social foundations of knowledge. But the book itself can be considered as evidence supporting one thesis developed by some participants in that undertaking who argued that cognitive products are also generated through societal communicative dynamics. Indeed the chapters of this book were initially presented as contributions to the first international congress organized by the Swiss Association of Psychologists. The congress was conceived as a response to the most fundamental social need, the need for communication.

The basic need to be fulfilled was not only the urgent desire of researchers to let colleagues share their most recent results. The essence of the need was also institutional. For many years the Swiss Association of Psychologists has tried to stimulate scientific communication. Important initiatives were the launching of the Swiss Journal of Psychology, the regular meetings of young researchers; their youth being defined through the freshness of ideas. However these initiatives have not always been successful. The Journal went through a crisis and participants in the meetings of young researchers sometimes were not numerous. Furthermore, even after seven hundred years of cultural and linguistic Helvetic pluralism another peculiar phenomenon often happened during these scientific meetings of psychologists: regularly members of linguistic regional groups left the conference room together and this seemed to happen more often when the speaker did not belong to their own linguistic group (p. 05). This strange phenomenon was considered by the Executive Committee of the Association as an instance of communicative behavior which did not fit in the frame of scientific universality. And the members of the Committee who had learned about the cognitive effects of social interactions thought it necessary to further them between autochthonous scholars from different linguistics regions.

As a result of the efforts of the Committee, chaired by Professor Meinrad Perrez, a proposal was accepted by ballot of the members of the General Meeting of the Association. The basic idea was that communication amongst Swiss scholars would be facilitated when using a language foreign to all of them: the English language. But everybody knows that linguistic competence functions differently according to specific communicative situations and the crux of the problem was to create encounter situations which would facilitate the use of the new scientific coin. Which situation would better serve that purpose than a situation in which Swiss researchers would be invited to communicate results of their research to foreigners with whom they share similar interests?

A necessary condition for realizing such a communication situation was to define a theme on which Swiss researchers would surely have messages to communicate. Of course every researcher has many things to communicate, but communication is more effective when a minimum of shared meaning preexists for the participants in the situation. An area of study was therefore defined offering reference points familiar to Swiss and foreign researchers. The members of the Executive Committee thought that social psychology as practised in Berne and Geneva could offer such reference points and therefore three social psychologists from these universities were invited to initiate this series of congresses which should be authentically Swiss but satisfying international standards. It was agreed upon from the beginning that these three social psychologists would receive the necessary funds to invite several foreign colleagues considered by them as first rate interlocutors for the specific theme of the congress.

So much for the social origins of a planned series of biannual international congresses to be organized by scholars appointed by the Executive Committee of the Swiss Association of Psychologists. To stick to the requirements, these congresses should be borne upon a theme researched by several Swiss scholars who have established a network of pro-

Wolfgang Scholl  
Institut für Wirtschafts- und Sozialpsychologie  
Georg-August-Universität  
Gosserstr. 14  
D - 3400 Göttingen

Maria Luisa Schubaer-Leobino  
Université de Genève  
Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4

Marie-Noëlle Schurmans  
Université de Genève  
Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4

Susanne Schwarz  
Psychologisches Institut  
Universität Heidelberg  
Hauptstrasse 47-51  
D - 6900 Heidelberg

Gün R. Semin  
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam  
Faculty of Psychology and Pedagogics  
De Boeleaan 1081  
NL - 1081 Amsterdam

Norbert Semmer  
Psychologisches Institut  
Universität Bern  
Gesellschaftsstrasse 49  
3012 Bern

Beat Thommen  
Rosenweg 11  
CH - 2555 Brugg bei Biel

Franziska Tschan  
Psychologisches Institut  
Universität Bern  
Gesellschaftsstrasse 49  
CH - 3012 Bern

Luisa Molinari  
Università degli Studi di Bologna  
Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Educazione  
Via Zamboni, 34  
I - 40126 Bologna

Jean Marc Monteil  
Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale  
de la Cognition  
Université Blaise Pascal  
F - 63000 Clermont-Ferrand

Serge Moscovici  
Ecole des Hautes Etudes  
en Sciences Sociales  
Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale  
44, rue de la Tour  
F - 75116 Paris

Gabriel Mugny  
Université de Genève  
Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4

Juan Antonio Pérez  
Université de Genève  
Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4

Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont  
Université de Neuchâtel  
Faculté des Lettres  
Séminaire de Psychologie  
Espace Louis-Agassiz 1  
CH - 2000 Neuchâtel

Monica Rubini  
Università degli Studi di Bologna  
Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Educazione  
Via Zamboni, 34  
I - 40126 Bologna

Klaus Scherer  
Université de Genève  
Section de Psychologie  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4

Wolfgang Scholl  
Institut für Wirtschafts- und Sozialpsychologie  
Georg-August-Universität  
Gosserstr. 14  
D - 3400 Göttingen

Maria Luisa Schubaer-Leobino  
Université de Genève  
Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4

Marie-Noëlle Schurmans  
Université de Genève  
Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4

Susanne Schwarz  
Psychologisches Institut  
Universität Heidelberg  
Hauptstrasse 47-51  
D - 6900 Heidelberg

Gün R. Semin  
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam  
Faculty of Psychology and Pedagogics  
De Boeleaan 1081  
NL - 1081 Amsterdam

Norbert Semmer  
Psychologisches Institut  
Universität Bern  
Gesellschaftsstrasse 49  
3012 Bern

Beat Thommen  
Rosenweg 11  
CH - 2555 Brugg bei Biel

Franziska Tschan  
Psychologisches Institut  
Universität Bern  
Gesellschaftsstrasse 49  
CH - 3012 Bern

Luisa Molinari  
Università degli Studi di Bologna  
Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Educazione  
Via Zamboni, 34  
I - 40126 Bologna

Jean Marc Monteil  
Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale  
de la Cognition  
Université Blaise Pascal  
F - 63000 Clermont-Ferrand

Serge Moscovici  
Ecole des Hautes Etudes  
en Sciences Sociales  
Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale  
44, rue de la Tour  
F - 75116 Paris

Gabriel Mugny  
Université de Genève  
Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4

Juan Antonio Pérez  
Université de Genève  
Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4

Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont  
Université de Neuchâtel  
Faculté des Lettres  
Séminaire de Psychologie  
Espace Louis-Agassiz 1  
CH - 2000 Neuchâtel

Monica Rubini  
Università degli Studi di Bologna  
Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Educazione  
Via Zamboni, 34  
I - 40126 Bologna

Klaus Scherer  
Université de Genève  
Section de Psychologie  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4

Wolfgang Scholl  
Institut für Wirtschafts- und Sozialpsychologie  
Georg-August-Universität  
Gosserstr. 14  
D - 3400 Göttingen

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Université de Genève  
Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4

Marie-Noëlle Schurmans  
Université de Genève  
Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4

Susanne Schwarz  
Psychologisches Institut  
Universität Heidelberg  
Hauptstrasse 47-51  
D - 6900 Heidelberg

Gün R. Semin  
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam  
Faculty of Psychology and Pedagogics  
De Boeleaan 1081  
NL - 1081 Amsterdam

Norbert Semmer  
Psychologisches Institut  
Universität Bern  
Gesellschaftsstrasse 49  
3012 Bern

Beat Thommen  
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CH - 2555 Brugg bei Biel

Franziska Tschan  
Psychologisches Institut  
Universität Bern  
Gesellschaftsstrasse 49  
CH - 3012 Bern

Luisa Molinari  
Università degli Studi di Bologna  
Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Educazione  
Via Zamboni, 34  
I - 40126 Bologna

Jean Marc Monteil  
Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale  
de la Cognition  
Université Blaise Pascal  
F - 63000 Clermont-Ferrand

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Ecole des Hautes Etudes  
en Sciences Sociales  
Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale  
44, rue de la Tour  
F - 75116 Paris

Gabriel Mugny  
Université de Genève  
Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4

Juan Antonio Pérez  
Université de Genève  
Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4

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Université de Neuchâtel  
Faculté des Lettres  
Séminaire de Psychologie  
Espace Louis-Agassiz 1  
CH - 2000 Neuchâtel

Monica Rubini  
Università degli Studi di Bologna  
Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Educazione  
Via Zamboni, 34  
I - 40126 Bologna

Klaus Scherer  
Université de Genève  
Section de Psychologie  
24, rue Général-Dufour  
CH - 1211 Genève 4