"Empty lands"? Social representations regarding contaminated brownfields in France

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Résumé

What first comes to mind when you think of contaminated brownfields? This study deals with social representations of contaminated brownfield based on the social representation theory (Wagner et al., 1999). Data are collected using two open-ended questions from a national cross-sectional survey administered among 803 individuals living in a municipality impacted by at least one contaminated brownfield in France. Thus, the analysis relies on spontaneous answers given for these two open-ended questions. We employ computer-based textual analysis using the software Iramuteq (Ratinaud & Déjean, 2009) to examine how people perceive soil-contaminated brownfield. We use textual statistics (Lebart & Salem, 1994), descending hierarchal classification of words representing semantic contexts, similarity analysis (Flament, 1981), factorial correspondence analyses and prototypical analysis. Textual statistics, similarity analysis and descending hierarchical classification allow to study the content of the social representations regarding contaminated brownfield. A factorial correspondence analyses allows us to examine regional differences regarding how brownfields are evoked. To the end, the prototypical analysis deepens the study by considering the structure of social representations regarding brownfields. More precisely, it examines the structure of the social representations regarding soil-contaminated brownfield and identify the central core of the social representations and its peripheral elements (Abric, 2001). Results show awareness regarding potential contamination of brownfields sites. However, this pollution is associated to visible elements but is disconnected from main pollutants that can be found on the site. We also observe regional disparities regarding contaminated brownfields representations, which are linked to historical activities in former industrial regions.

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