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Developing identities via different social representations: teenagers, unemployment and ideology

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Based on the assumption that identity is related to social representations, we want to establish that the social environment affects the building of social representations, and therefore of identities. It was decided to analyse the identities in a rapidly changing sample and to focus on the changes of the representations. The aim was to analyse the possible modifications of social representations, and also to study how they can be manipulated in a population still in the making. Various experimental tasks were created for a sample of 36 teenagers, aged 15 to 17; they were tested in an experiment composed of three phases. (1) All subjects were submitted to the same first task in which both social representations of unemployment and their ideology were studied. (2) The subjects were then randomly distributed into three groups. In the first experimental group the subjects were given a document created for the occasion, presented as a page from a newspaper with obvious leftist political comments on unemployment. In the second group the conditions were identical, except that the document presented was clearly conservative. A neutral document was presented to the control group. All the subjects had to read the document given and summarise it. (3) After a short break, they were all subjected to the third phase in which they had to evaluate various items. When one compares the social representations, before and after the experimental phase it can be noted that the central nucleus has not completely changed, but on the other hand the existence of different peripheral elements was confirmed, which implies a potential radical change. When one studies the social representation of other items such as employment and politics, it is also clear that the experimental phase has an impact on the representations of the subjects.

Introduction

In previous studies children and teenagers' economic understanding, knowledge and beliefs have been thoroughly analysed (Stacey, 1982; Leiser, 1983; Lassarre and Roland-Lévy, 1989; Roland-Lévy, 1990, 1998; Lundt and Furnham, 1996). Some studies have focused on the evolution of children's representations, for example in the context of rapid economic changes (Wosinski and Pietras, 1990; Zabukovec and Polic, 1990). In this paper social representations and ideology are taken as a starting point to study the identities of teenagers who are evolving rapidly during that particular period of their lives. Based on the assumption that social identity is related both to ideology and to social representation, the goal here is to establish that the social environment affects the building of social representations. The theoretical background is that of social representations (Moscovici, 1963, 1984, 1988). In this paper the structure of teenagers' economic representations is first analysed, in a way which is similar to that used by Vergès (1987). The changes which occur in these representations (if any), particularly in relation to unemployment, are also analysed. Various studies have focused on the development of conceptions and representations of unemployment (Despierre and Sorel 1979; Webley and Wrigley, 1983; Lidvan, 1987; Flament, 1994), but unemployment is taken here only as a means to investigate if and how social representations can be manipulated. The aim being to analyse the possible modifications of social representations, we chose to concentrate on

teenagers' representations of unemployment. These particular representations allow us to study how representations can be influenced in a population which is still in the making.

Theoretical background

The concept of social representation, initially conceived by Durkheim (1898), was revived by Moscovici in his study of the image of psychoanalysis (1961). As social forms of knowledge which are free from scientific constraints and naturalised in figurative schemata, social representations can serve as a basis to perceive and interpret reality, as well as to orient people's behaviour. From Moscovici's initial formulation, different theoretical orientations have been explored. Among them, Abric (1989, 1994) has elaborated a specific aspect of the theory of social representations based on a central nucleus surrounded by peripheral elements, the core being solid and rather unchangeable while the periphery is moving. The main objective is to find out whether social practices as well as the social environment have an effect on the building of social representations. If representations and identities or positions are considered from the same perspective, how can one explain the behaviour of the subjects? What role do identities and positions play in teenagers' representations of economic questions? In order to understand the problem of the relationship between representations, ideology and social practices, the structural approach of social representations in terms of a central nucleus and peripheral elements is used here. Through different experimental games, Abric (1971, 1989) showed that representations have an effect on behaviour. For example, by manipulating the representation of a task, Abric showed that when the same task is presented either as a problem to be solved or as a competition between partners, the behaviour of the subject is not the same. The representation of the context of the task therefore has a clear influence on the behaviour itself.

Method

Subjects

Various experimental tasks were created and tested on a sample composed of 34 teenagers, aged 15 to 17. An equal number of boys and girls, 17 of each, with a mean age of 16 were recruited. All were still going to school, which is compulsory in France at least up to the age of 16, either in the scientific stream or studying literature, but also in more specialised technical and professional streams. More than half of the sample mentioned that they really 'disliked' school, and one third of the total sample had already been excluded from school, either during the previous or the current school year. They were invited to attend the University campus on a Saturday afternoon for a meeting lasting approximately two hours. They were told in advance that, in acknowledgement of their participation, they would receive a free ticket for a movie of their choice at the end of the session.

Procedure

The teenagers had to produce different responses during an experiment composed of three phases: test, experimental condition and re-test. There were two experimental groups and a control group.

In the first phase, all the subjects were submitted to the same procedure in which their social representations of unemployment and their ideology were investigated. As in many studies of social representations, free association tasks using target-words were

submitted; the phase began with a series of four target-words (*future, poor, society, unemployment*). The subjects had to freely associate two to five words or phrases that came to mind with each target-word; they then had to re-classify the words according to their importance. This task produced important information about the content and structural construction of the representation. A series of written questions was then submitted in order to measure their political perception and their ideology. The questions started with a continuum going from *Left* to *Right* on which the subjects had to place an 'x' showing the location of their political ideas and opinions. Other questions followed. Would they vote? What political group or political programme would they vote for? Who would they choose from among a list of politicians? Did they feel they had the same political ideas as their parents or family? What magazines and/or newspapers were available at home? Which one(s), if any, did they read or just browse through? They were then asked to estimate the rate of unemployment in France from a choice of proposed percentages (less than 5%, about 10%, about 15%, or more than 20%). This series of questions was followed by descriptive characteristics such as: age, gender, school level, work or jobs if any, list of favourite activities, and parent's profession(s).

The subjects were then randomly distributed into three groups, and each group was sent to a different room. In each room a document was distributed: this was created for the occasion in order to operationalise both ideology and the social environment. The document looked like a full page taken from a newspaper with various articles, two graphs giving data about the same questions, and a humorous political caricature, all on the same main topic. In the first experimental group the subjects were given a document presented as a page from a newspaper with an obvious socialist tendency and rather leftist political comments on unemployment; ten teenagers, 6 boys and 4 girls, were in this first group. In the second experimental group the conditions were identical. The same graphs and drawing were distributed, but the document presented was clearly conservative, criticising the then French government policy on unemployment. Thirteen teenagers, 6 boys and 7 girls, were in this second experimental group. A comparable neutral document was presented to the control group. The topic of the neutral text was how to take care of trees and how to protect them throughout the winter, especially after the bad storms which had destroyed many species during the previous winter. Eleven teenagers, 5 boys and 6 girls, were in the control group with this neutral document. All the subjects, whether in the first two experimental groups or in the control group, had to read the document given to them and summarise it. This phase lasted half an hour. The text was rather long and it took the participants around 10 to 15 minutes to summarise it in a few lines. The summary was necessary to 'make' them examine the text thoroughly and would be used to verify whether the subjects had extracted the main informative data from it. The summary would also be used to compare their social representations, before and after the reading task.

Between phases 2 and 3 a short break was organised in order to create a gap between being given the data and producing responses. During the break, which lasted almost half an hour, the teenagers were offered soft drinks and biscuits. After this interruption the 34 subjects were all subjected to the third phase, in which they had to evaluate various items. This started with questions related to employment and unemployment. Why should one work? Why does someone become unemployed? In what type of area (urban, country...) is the highest rate of unemployment most often found? Who is most often unemployed? What types of professions are more affected by unemployment? Is the fall in unemployment due more to political measures of the *left* or of the *right*? Do you know

anyone who is unemployed? If yes, how many people and are they related to you? What profession would you like to follow? Imagine that you are unemployed; what would you do? (Proposed actions were listed). To conclude the whole experiment, they were asked as in the first phase to associate with a new series of four target-words (*projects, politics, money and employment*). The subjects had to freely associate two to five words or phrases with each target-word, and then to re-classify them according to their importance. Finally, they were asked to place an 'x' showing where they finally stood on a continuum going from *Left to Right*.

At the end of this concluding phase the participants were brought together for an explanation of the general procedure. Their questions were answered, and they received in thanks a free ticket for a film of their choice. The total experiment lasted approximately two hours.

Results

All the data obtained was analysed in terms of *before* and *after* the experimental phase. Firstly understanding, knowledge and social representations of unemployment were described, as well as the political ideology of the subjects. Secondly, the data was re-analysed, comparing answers from phase 1 to answers from phase 3, condition by condition. Not all the answers are described in this paper, but only those major results which help to understand how teenagers develop an identity of their own via ideology and social representations.

Initial representation of unemployment

All the subjects were aware that the rate of unemployment was still high in France. Half the sample gave a correct estimate of the percentage of unemployment at the time of our study (*about 10 %*), the other half had a tendency to overestimate the figure (*about 15 %*), which would have been the correct answer not so long ago. Among the various elements that might explain their knowledge and understanding of unemployment, one should note that only 6 out of the 34 subjects did not personally know any unemployed person. Among the others, 12 knew a minimum of one, often a member of their family, 7 knew two, 5 knew three, and the remaining 5 described a minimum of four unemployed within their family circle.

In order to understand the relationship between identities, representations and ideology, the social representation of our subjects is first presented, with the structural approach that of a central nucleus and peripheral elements. A high frequency combined with a low appearance rank of the terms implies that it is not only an important association for the subjects, but also that it is shared by a majority of the members of the group. It is therefore related to a social form of knowledge, used to perceive and interpret reality by the subjects belonging to a common group. Our subjects produced a total of 126 associative terms when reacting to the target-word 'unemployment' giving an average of 3.6 produced words per subject. The central nucleus of unemployment clearly describes a very negative view, which is dominated by drastic *difficulties* (9; 2) and is opposed to *work* (8; 2), which is associated first. Unemployment is also characterised by the absence of many important elements. Among the main missing elements resulting from unemployment, the absence of *salary* (7; 2) and the fact that *money is so important* (7; 2) seem to be obvious to our subjects. If unemployed, you need to *look for a job* (7; 3) otherwise, there is *nothing to do if you have no work* (!) (6; 2), and you can only receive

very little help from the government (6; 3). This description is clearly that of the central nucleus of unemployment, and does not take individual differences into account. In order to focus on individual representations, it would be necessary to enumerate all the elements constituting the peripheral structure which is based on a low frequency and either a low rank (among the first given associations by the subjects) or a high rank (among the last associations for the subjects). The peripheral structure is interesting as it is postulated to be the origin of a potential change of social representations, whereas the central nucleus is fixed and rather unchangeable. Here, among the elements composing the near peripheral dimension, subjects referred mainly to the fact that unemployment was a *social problem* (4; 2) which combined *misery* (4; 2) and *unhappiness* (4; 2). The representation of unemployment was also linked to *exclusion* and *isolation* (4; 2) as well as to becoming *addicted to alcohol* and *drugs* (4; 2).

What is the political ideology of the sample, and does it change?

The initial ideology of our subjects was, when looking at the two questions dealing with political parties and politicians, clearly more to the left than to the right on the political continuum. More than half the sample, 18 subjects, chose a left-wing party, including the socialist party and the green parties and a number of more extreme left groups (10 of the 18 opted for such an extremist position). Among the other subjects, 8 chose the right wing, but none the extreme right; the other 8 did not answer one of these two questions. More than two thirds of our total sample (24 subjects) considered themselves to have the same general political views as their parents and other members of their family.

They were also asked to locate themselves twice on a political axis, first at the very beginning of the study and later at the very end, with a slightly different presentation of the questions. What differences were there between the first location and the second position? More than half the sample, 18 subjects, tended to position themselves slightly more towards the right of the axis during the second evaluation, while 13 tended to go further in the opposite direction, towards the extreme left. Only one subject did not answer these two questions.

Various points are to be noted when looking at the two experimental groups. First, in the so-called 'right' group, the subjects were equally projected towards the right and the left, with 4 on each side, for a group composed of 14 subjects, which implies a lot of 'no answers'. On the other hand, in the 'left' group composed of 10 subjects, there are seven subjects on the left and three on the right side of the axis. In phase 3 the change of ideology occurs particularly in the 'right' group, with 7 teenagers going more towards the right side (the 4 who initially were on that side, plus 3 others who were more towards the centre). In the 'left' group, two subjects who were initially on the left side moved slowly towards the right, but they remained clearly to the left of the axis.

The tendency in the control group was somewhat different to that of the total group. Compared to the two experimental groups, there seemed to be no difference between the control group's choice of political parties and their position on the axes. The control group produced the same proportion of left and right choices in response to the questions on parties and politicians. When comparing the two axes, the same number of subjects moved towards the right end (5) as towards the left end (5), with only one subject not changing between the first and second evaluation. In conclusion, the observed changes in political ideology cannot really be taken into account since changes in the control group also occurred, and in both directions.

What else changes?

Before comparing the social representation, *before* and *after* the experimental treatment, it should be mentioned that the core of a representation should not change so easily in such a short time, but on the other hand one might expect changes in some of the peripheral elements. If the central nucleus did change it would imply a radical change of the representation, and if only the peripheral elements changed it would imply a potential possibility of mutations in the representation. A transformation of the representation is confirmed, as we will now reveal.

When studying the central nucleus of 'employment', new elements appear which were totally absent even in the peripheral elements of the representation of 'unemployment'. In order to *work* and to *be active* (13), as opposed to being *unemployed* (10), one should clearly *study* at school and get a *diploma* (8), which will in turn bring more *money* (6), along with *stability* (4), *security* (4) and *independence* (4) in the *future* (4). From a total of 96 associations to the target-word 'employment' - comparing the three groups of subjects - it is clear that subjects in the 'right' group produced considerable associations from the central core. The contrary is observed for the control group, in which no reference to either unemployment or employment was made in the neutral document. In that group, fewer components of the central core were produced. Lastly, in the 'left' group there is a balance of elements from the central core and from the near surroundings. This includes basically the idea of *being active* and *being busy* as opposed to being *unemployed*, with a rather neutral attitude insisting on the fact that unemployment is a *social problem*. This is combined with the idea that *one should be able to choose and appreciate one's job*.

Concerning the social representation of 'politics' - given after reading the documents in which no comments were made about politicians - it is interesting to mention that our teenagers had a lucid and negative vision of politics and politicians. In the centre of the core, the main components are verbs describing their lack of confidence in politicians who tend to *cheat* (15), to *lie* (15) and who should *not be trusted* (11); politicians are *corrupted* by *power* (11). What dominates the central nucleus of the social representation of 'politics' in the control group is clearly more neutral. It is related to political life with terms defining various elements combining *political parties*, *power of politics*, *elections* and the fact that one should *vote*. It would be interesting to compare this representation with that of equivalent subjects in other countries.

Discussion

To conclude, it appears that reading the document during the experimental phase considerably influenced the subjects in the two experimental groups. When the social representations are compared *before* and *after* this phase, it can be noted that the central nucleus did not change completely in such a short time, but on the other hand, many different peripheral elements were present, which implies a potentially radical change. When one compares the social representation of unemployment with those of other items such as employment and politics, it is also clear that the experimental phase had an impact on the representations of the subjects.

Before reaching the conclusion that it is so easy to manipulate the representations of teenagers, one might also recall that there are individual differences based on social practices as well as on the social environment of the subjects. In order to be credible, the

topic of representation should be a relevant one for the subjects involved. Viaud, who demonstrated the importance of the subject's place in the social structure, indicates that the representations of the social environment are gradually integrated into the subjects' identity. The representations are therefore subject to change because social representations are based on specific sub-cultures and on the values of one's own group. Social representations are generated both by the subject's social position and by his/her social practices, but Viaud has shown that the opposite is also true: social positions and social practices can in turn be influenced by social representations (Viaud, 1998). This point should be born in mind when building new educational programmes.

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