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Becoming European with the Euro: teenagers' attitudes before and after 2002

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Introduction

Based on two series of studies, this paper analyses the potential effect of the introduction of the Euro-currency on teenager' perception of Europe. It is assumed that the feeling of belonging to Europe, along with the impression of being European, might have changed with the arrival of a common European currency, introduced at the same time in the twelve countries belonging to the Euro zone. It is hypothesised that this perception will vary according to psychological variables, related both to the subjects themselves and to the level of familiarity based on the virtual or concrete practice of the Euro. In consequence, this paper compares attitudes and social representations toward the Euro six months before the concrete introduction of the Euro, and during January and February 2002, after the Euro became the common currency in the European Monetary Union. Two different samples of teenage subjects are studied and compared during these two distinct phases. Data concerning the influence of the Euro in relation with becoming more European are discussed later in the paper.

Becoming European

The main purpose of this paper is to explore national identity compared to European identity, along with the feeling of belonging to the country or to Europe itself. Europe is now at a concrete stage in the process of European integration, with a single European currency. The basis of integration is presumed to be the wish for a stronger Europe. Recent research has addressed issues evolving around the monetary integration. An earlier study (Müller-Peters *et al.*, 1998) demonstrated that in most countries attitudes towards the Euro are positively correlated with attitudes toward the European Union. Pepermens and Verleye (1998) showed that the latter are also linked to perceptions of national features. The results obtained by van Everdingen and van Raaij (1998) also suggest that national identity has indirect effects on attitudes, by influencing expectations about the Euro. Meier and Kirchler (1998) reported that opponents, indifferent respondents and supporters of the Euro are distinguished on the basis of social representations which vary in content and structure. More importantly, the difference between opponents and supporters refers to national identity preoccupations.

Attitudes and social representation

Social representations express the values, norms and attitudes of social groups; therefore, the concept should allow us to analyse how a new object, the Euro, is perceived, both while it is still virtual and once it becomes a daily reality. The representation of a social object is the description of how it is perceived, so there should be a strong relationship

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between the social representation of this object and the subject's attitude toward it. This study aims at showing how a new representation is gradually being built, starting with different individual attitudes, and becoming shared by many, thus building a shared social representation. The analysis of a sample of teenagers should bring new information regarding how social representations are being built. It is especially interesting to study the general attitude toward the Euro for our samples, the goal being, on the one hand, to examine the relations between social representations and attitudes, and on the other hand, to study potential links between them and national or European identity.

Initially conceived by Durkheim (1898) at the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of social representation was revived by Moscovici (1961, 1989) in his study of psychoanalysis in French society. Social representations are social forms of knowledge, free from scientific constraints and formalised in figurative *schemata*. They can serve as a basis for perceiving and interpreting reality, as well as for channelling people's behaviour. Furthermore, they are related to the social characteristics of people, and empirical evidence shows that it is usually possible to distinguish different social representations corresponding to particular social groups. The initial formulation of Moscovici focuses on the genesis of social representations through two major processes. *Objectivation* first translates some of the characteristics of an unfamiliar object (such as a new currency) into the terms of our realities. Selection of information, decontextualization and reconstruction into a schema built with certain dimensions are the different stages involved in this process. *Anchoring* includes two different aspects: a cognitive aspect according to which the new object is integrated into the previous thoughts of individuals, and a social aspect having to do with a social group getting involved in giving meaning to a representation. Thus, interpretations of a particular object differ from one social group to another. Since Moscovici's early work, different theoretical approaches have been developed. One of them considers the cognitive organisation of social representations in terms of different kinds of elements: central *versus* peripheral ones. According to Abric's (1976, 1994) structural approach, social representations are composed of a central *nucleus* and peripheral elements. This theoretical approach, based on a hierarchical structure of the representation, can be completed by Flament's (1962, 1981) concerning the internal structure of the representation. This paper refers to both theories, using two different methodological approaches. In fact, in order to study social representations, various techniques can be applied; here, two techniques are used to study social representations. The first is based on free association tasks, while the second is a selection of blocks of items forming the core of the representation.

In this paper, a comparison of the feeling of belonging to one's country, France in our case, with the feeling of being European, is explored in relation to knowledge about the European Union and about the European Monetary Union, linked with attitudes and with representations of the Euro.

Method

It was hypothesised that differences in terms of social representations and attitudes before and after the arrival of the Euro would be found. The feeling of belonging might also change in phase two as a concrete single European currency was now being used. Two samples of teenagers were studied in order to test this during these two phases. A questionnaire was designed to investigate attitudes and social representations of the

national currency and of the Euro, along with the feeling of belonging. In this questionnaire, subjects' representations related mainly to the Euro were first considered. A series of attitude scales were introduced to measure the attitudes toward the Euro and Europe. Subjects were also asked to identify the countries belonging to the European Monetary Union. With the practical use of the new single currency, both social representations and attitudes were expected to change, and these changes were likely to have an impact on the feeling of belonging to Europe itself.

Population and samples for the two phases of the study

In the first phase, a sample of 52 French teenagers (age 14 to 18, mean age 15.6) was selected from Paris and its suburban area. 26 girls and an equal number of boys, from different social backgrounds and with a large variety of types and levels of education, were interviewed during the first phase with a face-to-face questionnaire. In the second phase, 205 French subjects from varied social origins were also chosen; this sample was composed of 107 teenage girls and 98 boys (11 to 18 year olds, mean age 14.5). All the teenagers were interviewed for the second phase, between the first week of January 2002 and the second week of February of the same year.

Material and procedure

Very similar procedures were used during both phases, but some variations should be noted; the differences are related first to the fact that during phase one, the Euro was still a virtual future currency while it became real and concrete in phase two, and second, a different technique was introduced to study social representations during each phase.

In phase one, subjects' representations of the upcoming currency were tested according to Abric's central core hypothesis (1976, 1982, 1984, 1988), based on free association tasks. Vergès' methodological tools were used to investigate the composition of the central nucleus of social representation (1992, 1998, 2001), both in terms of frequency and of rank of appearance of the evoked terms. According to the theory, most subjects share the terms belonging to the nucleus; this implies that these will be spontaneously produced by many subjects (high frequency); as these terms are important to the group, they will be called to mind early (at a low rank). On the opposite, the periphery, which takes into account individuality, categorises terms which are not shared by many (with a low frequency); the peripheral elements usually occur later (at a high rank.) This combination of the frequency and of the rank of appearance shows the hierarchical structure of the representation.

In phase two, subjects' representations of the Euro were tested according to the similarity between items, along with an analysis of the connections among them (cf. Flament, 1962, 1981; Degenne, Vergès, 1973; Degenne, 1985; Vergès, 1985), the goal of this technique being to explore how terms are related to each other; this technique shows the internal structure of the representation. Based on an adaptation of Guimelli's methodological tool, founded on the selection of blocks of items (1989), subjects had to select the five items that best represented the Euro from a list of 25 items built with items which were spontaneously produced in the first phase of the study, and the five that represented the least the Euro; all remaining items are considered neutral. With this technique, which is another way of identifying the structure of the representation, one can distinguish terms which are strongly linked together, via a score of connexity, and they can be graphically represented.

In both phases, subjects were then asked to rank a series of eleven Likert type attitude scales related to the new currency. After a factor analysis, only eight scales were kept, as the others proved not to be reliable (after the three scales were deleted $\alpha = .6590$). The remaining scales combined together allow us to assign an attitudinal score which defines the general tendency - positive (from 3 to 5), neutral or negative (from 0 to 2) - of the attitude of the samples toward the Euro.

In order to test whether our subjects had a feeling of being French rather than European, or the other way around, a specific direct open-ended question in each questionnaire was asked: “*Do you feel European? Explain why and how*”. A content analysis was carried out to categorise the different types of responses. In addition, in order to test the familiarity with Europe, a list of 20 countries – the twelve countries from the European Monetary Union, plus other European countries and including some non-European countries (e.g. Israel and Turkey) – was included. Subjects had to identify the countries belonging to the Euro zone.

Personal characteristics (age, gender, schooling, etc.) were recorded. It took approximately half an hour for subjects to complete the different steps of this questionnaire.

Results

Representations, attitudes and feeling of belonging are compared for each phase, before and after January 2002. The results obtained are presented for the two samples of subjects, distinctly for each phase of the study, pointing out when appropriate main gender differences.

Similarities and divergence of representations

When comparing the representations obtained before and after 2002, based first on a virtual practice of the Euro, and later, on concrete manipulation of coins and bills during everyday life, some global results appear.

1. During the first phase, social representations of the French Franc and the Euro, the 52 teenagers, express clear distinctions between the currencies. For all subjects, the Franc materialises as the shared symbol of *France*. This emblem is completed in the centre of the representation by the fact that it is *money*. Two thirds of the sample mention *coins* and *bills* in the near periphery. The Franc is also linked, for our teenagers, to *spending*, which also belongs to the near periphery. *Europe* is the most central element of the social representation of the Euro, but it is undoubtedly *money* for two-thirds of the subjects. Other terms appear in the near periphery and could easily slide to the centre of the Euro representation, for example, the notion of *union*, which is produced by the majority of teenagers with a low rank. Finally, teenagers also include in the centre of their representation the idea of *novelty*. But, for them, *complexity* is also central; it is often linked to the difficulties of money *conversions*. On the opposite, they consider that life will be easier with one *single currency* throughout the Euro zone, as it will definitely facilitate international *exchange*; these two matching ideas appear in the periphery of their representation of the Euro. Even though the Franc and the Euro appear to symbolise different objects, mainly different states, France or Europe, social representations of both items are clearly linked to the concept of *money*.

2. In the second phase, after the Euro had been introduced, the Euro is still obviously seen as the symbol of *Europe*. The group of 205 teenagers now tends to have a shared representation of the Euro, this representation being focused around four key notions: *Europe*, *union*, *novelty* and *money*. When studying the main items selected as symbols contrasting with the Euro, the *Dollar* comes first, along with the idea of *complexity* and surprisingly enough with the idea of *easiness*. Concerning the shared representation of the former national currency, nothing has changed, the Franc is still perceived as the local *money*, which symbolises *France*.

Attitudes toward the Euro

1. In the first period of the study, it was possible to study the attitude of the subjects via two different steps. Firstly, among the words which were spontaneously produced with the free associations, a large proportion were neutral, while some appeared to be undoubtedly positive and others were clearly negative. When analysing the negative elements of the representation of the Euro, 12.63% of all the evoked terms appear to have an evident negative connotation. The second step is related to the various Likert scales. By summing up the results obtained through the eight remaining scales, the overall attitude toward the Euro appears to be neutral for our 52 teenagers; the average score is 2.42 (0 being totally negative, 5 being totally positive). The answers of individuals are widely spread, with extreme answers in both directions, which produces a high dispersion of answers (SD = 1.07).
2. During the second period, attitudes could only be measured via the average score obtained through the eight scales put together; the overall attitude toward the Euro of the 205 teenagers interviewed is very similar to the one obtained in the first phase (M = 2.42), even though it is now slightly more positive, it is still close to being neutral (M = 2.7) with a smaller dispersion of answers (SD = 0.74).

Nation or Europe?

Concerning the specific question related to the feeling of being European, it is clear that when this question was asked during the first phase of the study, the main tendency was to say that even though France belongs to Europe, the respondents felt French and not European. When analysing the answers to this open-ended question in phase two, after the introduction of the Euro, the answers had changed. The majority of the subjects explained that they are European, since they use the same currency as 'so many' other European countries. This is a radical change, which is surprising enough, as if the introduction of a single currency could really change in such a brief period of time (less than six months) the feeling of belonging. One might suggest that this result could be related to the way the question was formulated in a survey dealing with the Euro, but, the same formulation was used during the first phase of the study and the answers were extremely different.

Among the questions dealing with Europe in the second questionnaire, a list of 20 countries was included and subjects had to circle the countries belonging to the Euro zone. The average number of countries stated as part of the European Monetary Union is ten per subject. There are no differences between the quality of answers of boys or girls. When classifying the countries, as they were selected by the 205 teenagers, the following order is obtained: France is identified by all the teenagers as belonging to the Euro zone (205) followed by Spain (204), Italy (198), Germany (196), Belgium (194), the Netherlands (187), followed by both Luxembourg and Portugal (185), then by Greece (157), Austria (146), *Denmark* (132) which precedes Finland (123) and Ireland (99);

Norway is selected by 65 subjects, then comes Sweden (51) and the UK (22). Turkey has been selected 19 times, Romania 14, Tunisia 5 and Israel twice.

The most remarkable result is that the French teenagers who were consulted in this survey are not well informed about the fact that twelve countries are part of the Euro zone; they are not even well aware of which country belongs to Europe as quite a few have selected countries outside Europe.

Concluding comments

If we consider the evolution which occurred during the two periods, a few points are worth noting. In terms of knowledge about Europe and the Euro zone, there are no significant differences between girls and boys. The main difference in terms of gender is related to the general attitude toward the new currency. Girls tend to have a neutral attitude ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 80$) compared to boys who have a positive one ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 68$). In the second phase, girls and boys share the same representation of the Euro, but girls include among the terms selected as not representing the Euro, the term *conversion*, as if for them it was easy to adapt to the Euro, without having any problem. In fact, there was a task in which subjects were expected to give the price of a stamp for a normal letter to Europe, in Euro (the price being in France €0.48); it appears that girls tend to know the precise price. In the first phase, there was a task implying conversions from French Francs to Euros, and, contrary to the findings from an adult sample, both girls and boys appeared to be extremely good at the converting task with a natural spontaneous approximation of prices, as if they knew how to 'automatically' convert the Franc into Euro.

Finally, for boys and girls of our sample, the concrete use of the new currency seem to have definitely influenced the perception of being European.

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