

THE INTERNAL STRUCTURE OF THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF CULTURE: AN EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTION

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Abstract

According to Abric's (1983) structural approach, social representations (Moscovici, 1961) are made of a central nucleus surrounded by peripheral elements. This theoretical approach, based on a hierarchical structure, deals with the idea of a specific internal configuration of every representation. Abric (1994) and Flament (1994), moreover argued that social practices, related to specific social context, were a major factor in the co-construction of a representation. Starting from this theoretical framework, the purpose of this study is to identify the social representations of culture, circulating among young Neapolitan students. The aim is also to verify if these representations are different from each other, starting from the different social environments of production. Two groups of pupils (161 participants, in the age between 8 and 10 years old), belonging to opposite local contexts, both from structural and socio-economical point of view, took part in the study. We choose a quali-quantitative approach using a free associations questionnaire. In particular, we asked the children to freely indicate five words when they think about culture; then we asked them to motivate the words they choose and in the end to organize those words in order of importance. Collected data were analysed by the Hierarchical Evocations Technique (Vergès, 1992). The results, discussed from their theoretical, methodological and applicative implications, confirm the presence of stimulating differences between the two SRs.

Keywords: Culture, Social Psychology, Social Representations, Development Age, Qualitative-quantitative research, Hierarchical Evocations Technique

1 INTRODUCTION

At the base of the concept of culture it's possible to recognize a system of symbols and values shared by a specific community that originate tangible actions (as work, behaviors, artefacts production), and intangible actions (as faith, religion, rules, social conventions). All the dynamics generated from this system of values and symbols influence the relationship between people. How do we gain culture? Can culture socially legitimate a community? To find an answer to these questions, Serge Moscovici, from the second half of the past century, began to study the working of "common sense" and the mechanisms of the social knowledge (Galli, 2006). At the bottom of the social knowledge, Moscovici, recognizes as a key factor the collective representations, characterized by a double, creative and emblematic property, underlining the importance of social factors compared with the individual ones, for the determination of daily behaviors.

In the perspective of psycho-social research concerning the study of culture, Valsiner (2012, 4) claims that:

There can be very many different vantage points from where culture could enter into psychology in the twenty-first century. First, of course, there are the realistic connections with neighboring disciplines – cultural anthropology (Holland, 2010; Obeyesekere, 2005, 2010; Skinner, Pach, & Holland, 1998), and sociology (Kharlamov, 2012) – from where such efforts could find their start. Yet in the last decade, we also can observe a number of moves towards embracing the notion of culture. Although it began from the education and developmental concerns of the 1980s that mostly used the ideas of Vygotsky as the center of their new efforts, by 2010s the effort also includes social psychology – both in Europe and in the United States – where the generic label “social” becomes frequently taken over by “cultural”.

Culture is considered as a complex combination of actions and mechanisms produced by continuous social interactions, generating processes of sense making and reformulation of the process of reality – as a variable product and as a result of subjectivities which, from time to time, constitute and reorganize its parameters. For these reasons, culture cannot be a paradigmatic, static and defined reference. To correctly set this process, culture is to be considered as a constant re-negotiation of the relationship between Ego and Otherness and not as a finished and definitive entity, whose edges can be traced (Leone, Mazzara, Sarrica, 2013, 31). Cole (1996) claims that the deepest nature of culture and its potential to structure human mind should be researched not in its constitutive features, but in its moments of transition, negotiation and exchange, and so within the edge between, and not inside, cultures.

Psychological processes are structured by social interactions and specifically by culture, meant as shared meanings, combinations of values and groups, and material and ideal artefacts, through which people establish an interaction with the external world. This idea is necessary to identify the psychological processes as factors, which give sense to reality, considered as a continuous process of interpretation - historically denoted - of the human community where people live (Bruner, 1990). Specific tools as language, system of ideas, symbols and representations - all functional to the projectuality of human action - mediate the relationship between people and external reality. Also the ordinary and everyday actions, which have the function to strengthen the cultural references and which represent the basis of the implicit knowledge - and structure social relationships -, are an important tool of mediation between subject and world. This concept allows to pass from the idea of the mind as exclusively subordinated to organic-biological processes, deriving from the brain working, to the idea that culture is seen as an essential tool for human mind to operate. The concept of “continuous exchange”, as a generative process of culture, is based on the conception of mind as a substantially dialogic entity. The sense of personal experience is made of conversational practices between subjects in a constant interaction with others. It follows that functionalities of mind (thought, memory, Self, emotions) - commonly considered as autonomous entities working respecting defined and universal rules - are considered as a reformulated product of the necessary relationships with others. Both in everyday life and in the universe of knowledge/meanings that are the basis of social interactions and cultural contexts (Leone, Mazzara, Sarrica, 2013).

2 THE RESEARCH: MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this research is to identify the social representation (SR) of culture circulating among young Neapolitan students. The aim is also to verify if these representations are different from each other, starting from the different social environments of production. Through a non-probabilistic judgment sampling, we divided the total sample into two subsamples from four different schools. The first subsample is made of 70 subjects (32 F/38 M) between 9 and 10 years old, from a mid-low socio-economic context, of the city of Naples. The second subsample is made of 91 subjects (45 F/46 M), between 8 and 10 years old, from a mid-high socio-economic context, of the same city. The differences between the two urban sub-dimensions were identified through a set of indicators made by the municipal administration of the city of Naples with the objective to realise the “Community profile of Naples” (Comune di Napoli, 2012).

All the interviews and the data were collected in 25 days. All the students involved took part to the study voluntarily – only 2 subjects for each subsample, refused to participate.

To identify the nucleus and periphery of the SR of culture, we asked the children to freely associate 5 words when they think about culture; then we asked them to motivate the words they choose. The participants' motivations permitted to understand the exact meaning of each word and to collect information about the representational process (Fasanelli, Galli, Sommella, 2005). Then, we asked the participants to organize the 5 words in order of importance, as expected by the Hierarchical Evocations Technique (Abric, 2003). This technique offers a simple reading of the SR structure and identifies, through a “double entry” table, the central nucleus zone with the peripheral and the contrast/complementary elements. The analysis was

conducted by the software Evoc2005, cross-checking the frequency (Fq) and the importance (Rank). A strong correlation between the frequency of the words and their rank gave the necessary information to establish whether an element is central in a SR structure (Vergés, 1992).

The following table (Tab 1) shows the output of the hierarchical evocations analysis of the mid-low context subsamples.

Table 1: SR Structure Mid-Low Context

		Importance Rank					
		Rank < 2,50		Rank >= 2,50			
Frequency	Fq >= 14	art	19	2,421	portrait	17	3,294
		study	18	2,333	learning	15	2,733
					ancient civilization	22	3,182
					sculpture	19	2,789
	Fq < 13	intelligence	5	2,200	books	8	4,000
		school	10	2,300	cultural places	13	3,154
		emotions	6	2,333	teachers	5	3,154
					study subjects	5	3,800
					monuments	5	3,200
					quality people	8	3,000
					rules	5	2,600
					sciences	5	3,400
					writing	8	3,125
			history	11	3,000		

In the first cell (up-left), there are the elements of the SR's central nucleus. The most important words are "study" and "art". A 10-year-old male pupil (n_5), motivates "art" by the sentence "in my opinion the culture is in the art and in the way to express it". A 9-year-old female pupil (n_33) writes, "In the art there is always the culture".

Most of the interviewed subjects associate the study to the social practice connected with the acquisition of culture. A 9-year-old female pupil (n_3) writes, "Through the study, I can learn things and so I learn the culture".

In the second cell (up right), there are the elements of the SR's first periphery as: "portrait", "learning", "ancient civilization", "sculpture". A 9-year-old female pupil (n_11) affirms, "The portraits and the paintings represent the culture". A 9-year-old male pupil (n_17) claims "when we learn, we become acculturate". The "ancient civilization" indicates the importance of the ancient societies studies, effectively a 9 year old female pupil (n_59) writes that "we are studying the ancient Egypt and its culture". Concerning the element "sculpture", a 9-year-old female pupil (n_45) claims "people build sculptures for the historical heroes and the important people".

In the third cell (down-left), we find "intelligence", "school" and "emotions", which are important to understand the meaning of the SR's central nucleus. Some subjects identify the concept of "intelligence" as the prerequisite necessary to access to the culture, and the "school" as a cultural place for learning. The "emotions" semantic category includes all the emotional states connected to the culture. A 9-year-old female pupil (n_41), claims, about the intelligence concept that "learning is not enough, you also have to understand". Another 10-year-old male pupil (n_20) writes, "The school is important and it represents culture". For the "emotions" semantic category, a 9-year-old female pupil (n_39) states, "we feel admiration for acculturated people".

In the last cell - second periphery zone – there are elements such: “books”, “places of culture”, “sciences”, “writing”, and “history”. The books are considered as the primary tool for the acquisition of culture. A 9-year-old female pupil (n_3) writes “when I read books, I know what culture is”. A 9-year-old female pupil (n_45) claims, about the “places of culture”, that “museum contains historical items that are culture”. A 9-year-old female pupil (n_58) writes about the “sciences” that “they represent the culture of animals and plants”. A 9 year old female pupil (n_3) writes “every culture has its history” concerning the element “history”.

The following table (Tab 2) represents the SR’s structure of the mid-high context subsample.

Table 2: Struttura RS Scuole Medio-Alte

		Importance Rank				
		Rang < 2,60	Rang >= 2,60			
Frequency	Fq >= 15	intelligence	19 2,053	art	15 3,133	
		study	32 2,594	happiness	15 3,000	
				study subjects	26 3,423	
				school	17 2,882	
	Fq < 14		knowledge	12 2,333	professions	9 3,222
			fantasy	7 2,429	music	4 3,250
			reading	8 2,125	painting	9 3,333
			perception	5 2,200	ancient civilization	8 3,500
			sciences	13 2,400	quality people	13 3,000
			history	5 1,400	rules	10 3,000
					sculpture	7 3,714
					emotions	8 2,875
					tools	4 3,750
					valuations	10 3,100

The SR’s central nucleus of culture in the mid-high socio-economic context subsample contains the elements “intelligence” and “study”. The element “intelligence” is considered once again as a prerequisite to access to the culture, and the “study” as a tool of acquisition of culture. A 9-year-old female pupil (n_127) affirms “the intelligence is a gift that can be gained if you study, and it’s important for culture”. Another 9-year-old male pupil (n_160) writes “without study we can’t do anything”.

In the second cell on the right, that includes the elements connected to the social practices, we can find “school”, “subjects of study” and the emotional state of “happiness” that is connected to the “art”. A 9 year old female pupil (n_85) states, about the “subject of study”, that “study of history, gives your brain much information about everything”. A 9-year-old male pupil (n_153) expresses his happiness about art and he writes, “Seeing the culture, it’s beautiful”.

In the third cell, there is the element of “knowledge” identified by the participants as the base of the culture. The “sciences” element gives importance to the concept of culture. A 9-year-old male pupil (n_151) claims “culture is scientific”.

In the last cell - second periphery zone - some subjects show their aspiration for some kind of profession. A 9-year-old female pupil (n_93) writes, “When I grow up, I want to be a stylist, so I have to study”. Plus, through a deeper analysis of the periphery, we can hypothesize that elements like “history”, “sciences” or “emotions” could explain what the culture is, for the pupils interviewed.

3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The element “school” as common aspect between the two groups shows two different meaning. The reference to “school” as concrete place and institution providing culture, made by the mid-low context pupils,

counterbalances the metaphorical idea of the subjective intelligence as access to the world of culture, made by the mid-high context pupils

The results show that the concepts used by the subjects from the mid-low context school build a social representation of culture based on the school system and on the learning practices.

The participants of the mid-low context schools express an interest about the cultural art, as a form of transmission of knowledge and iconographic representation. The words that identify the central nucleus of the social representation of the pupils who lives in this context are “art” and “study”. In particular, the “study” identifies a tool of “social redemption” and emancipation. A 9-year-old male pupil (n_18) writes that he wants to study and he wants to go to school “to be acculturated and to find a job”. According to the interviewed, the “study” is considered as the practice to access to the culture. The school, otherwise, represents the place of knowledge and of the learning of scientific subjects. “Art” is considered as an element of creativity and of cultural production. The interviewees claim that “painting” and “sculpture” are prototypical expressions of culture.

The participants from the mid-high context build their social representation of culture starting from the role of “intelligence” and “study”. According to these pupils, and through their explicit argumentation, “intelligence” is a necessary requisite for the access to the culture and “study” is the main tool for the acquisition of culture.

The differences emerged among the pupils involved in this study, remind us the ancient diatribe between Vygotsky and Piaget (Vygotsky, 1962) on the function of the egocentric thought. Only future studies, more targeted on descriptive, connotative and evaluative aspects of the social representations, could allow us to understand the pre-adolescent way of thinking about culture. Moreover, we know that children’s development is a social process but we know very little about how the socio-economic milieus contribute to understand what children know about the culture in which they are born. Researches on how children think about culture are few. We also know little about children’s social representations of culture and about how specific social contexts shape the nature of children’s knowledge.

As Sandra Jovchelovitch et al. (2013) argued, social contexts are likely to impact on the knowledge children construct about it and lead to differences in the ways they engage symbolic resources to make sense of the world “outside”. Through a social representational approach to the study of knowledge in context (Duveen, 2000; Moscovici, 1961; Wagner & Hayes, 2005; Jovchelovitch, 2007), we focus on the specificity of children’s knowledge of the object-culture and the potential impact of socio-economic contexts on its structure and content.

Starting from the theoretical assumption that the development of knowledge about the world, and instead the culture, is not only age-related but also channeled by the bio-psycho-social configuration of the context in which children grow (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978, 1997). In other words, is the psycho-socio-economic variety of a context that influences the social representations children construct about culture and reality itself?

Future analyses of children’s representations of the culture, carried out in a more qualitative way, could offer the possibility of understanding the children reflexive way of reasoning.

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