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NORMATIVE AND COUNTER-NORMATIVE ELEMENTS IN THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF BRAZILIAN ADOLESCENTS ON THE WORK

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INTRODUCTION

Abric finished one of his more recent texts about the existence of a "mute zone" in social representations by affirming *"to hope that, if this notion shows itself to be essential, it will open a field of research so much theoretical that methodological, that will permit to social representation theory to know some important and innovative developments"* (Abric, 2004). It was to accept this challenge that I decided to present some reflections that have been developed since 1999 concerning research results obtained in Brazil about working in the adolescence. Abric's propositions, as well as those provided by Guimelli and Deschamps, come very adequately to light up.

The initial concern of this communication departs from the fact that a solicited verbalization does not necessarily express the whole content of somebody's thought. In order to don't run the risk of misinterpreting the original assumptions to which I intend to add a contribution, these will be fully transcribed (although, for this oral presentation, without indicating the source of each quotation, because some of them were drawn from an unpublished paper, besides from his 2003 book).

In this sense, in Abric's words, *"interviewed people don't say us everything, they hide from us certain components of their thought in certain situations"*. In sequence, Abric proposes that *"there are two facets, two components of the representation: an explicit representation, verbalized; and a second part of the representation, not verbalized, not expressed: that is what we call the "mute zone"*. (Abric, 2004)

Considering the proximity that the unconscious processes and the "mute zone" could present, Abric (2004) distinguishes between them in the following terms: *"the mute zone is not the unconscious part of our representations (...) it makes part of the individual conscience, it is known by them, but it cannot be expressed because the individual, or the group, doesn't want to express it publicly or explicitly"*. The author insists that the "mute zone" is the hidden face of the representation, which has its determination strongly anchored on the social norms, that is to say, in the *"social situation in which the representation is produced"*. (Abric, 2004)

A second concern of the author refers to the consideration that that hidden part of the representation may not be observed in all studied objects. It is just applied to those objects *"greatly funded on values and for certain contexts: risks*

of judgments, social desirability, auto-presentation. (Abric, 2003, 2004; Guimelli and Deschamps, 2000)

It must be considered as a fundamental characteristic of that non explicit part of the representation the fact that it is *"constituted by elements having an counter-normative character"*, as some sort of *"illegitimate central elements"* (Abric, 2004), that is to say, those elements that may commit the interviewee's image, once they are presented in a sense contrary to that of his/her social group.

Both Guimelli and Deschamps (2000) define the "mute zone" as a *"specific subset of cognitions or beliefs, that, although being available, are not expressed by the subjects in the normal conditions of production, and that... if they were expressed (notably in certain situations), could put into question the moral values or norms valorized by the group"*. In developing the causes of the emergence of non verbalized elements in the representation, Abric stresses that the subjects may *"verbalize the attitudes, opinions or beliefs that are according to the norm and not to express those that are not"* (Abric, 2003, 2004).

One second form of expression of that process of concealing certain elements of the social representation is highlighted by the author as *"another way of don't formulating counter-normative answers to implicative questions: it is not to answer to the question"* (Abric, 2004).

Concerning the types of participant elements of the representation that can stay hidden, Abric (2003, 2004) considers that *"if they are certain elements of the central core of representations that are hidden, it is all the significance of the representation that is hidden, it is all the significance of the representation that is marked, it is the not said that is then essential, it is the entire researcher's interpretation that is distorted"*.

That last assertive of the author gives a clear notion of the importance of that theoretical and methodological development to the field of social representations, since, particularly in the areas of health and education, we meet ourselves, with some frequency, implicated with study objects that are submitted to normative pressures and strongly invested of values. That is, particularly, the characteristic of the object studied by us, since the working activity by young people and children in Brazil, as well as in all outlying countries, is a real problem that resists to the technological development and to the globalization process, keeping different relationships with the social norm and with the daily reality.

The adolescents that alternate working and studying periods every day, and face difficulties to reconcile both activities, constitute a persistent reality that has recrudesced in the last years as a function of successive economic crises and of the impoverishment of the Brazilian population. In great metropolises, as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte, such a reality is more visible, since many adolescents that attend to public teaching need also to work in order to help to compose the family budget, and thus, frequently, their school activity falls to a second plan.

The precocious salaried work, accomplished by adolescents, involves particularities that characterize it as a polemic subject, which remains still far away from any consensus regarding its benefits and damages, either to physical health, to personality formation, to socialization or to scholarship. The salaried work, in that strip of age, establishes a competition with the activities of learning, sport and leisure, that is to say, those activities that provide a healthy way to the psychological and social formation of the youth.

If, on one side, working in that stage of the life contributes to the formation of values and to the acquisition of positive traces of personality, like responsibility and independence, on the other side, it deprives the youth of experiencing the characteristic contradictions of that age group. Instead, they are demanded to assume patterns of behavior and responsibilities that are typically adult ones and occupy the time that should be dedicated to the school, so leading to a low school performance and, many times, to the abandon of school.

Those practices are, very probably, sustained by representations of the work that tend to prioritize working over studying, as well as to justify the permanence of the youths in the labor market. So, they are frequently led to abandon school precociously, still in a moment of obligatory scholarship.

As observed in a previous study (Oliveira, D.C.; Fischer, F.M.; Martins, I.S.; Costa, L.A.R.; Teixeira, L.R.; Sá, C.P., 2000; Oliveira, D.C.; Fischer, F.M.; Martins, I.S.; Teixeira, L.R.; Sá, C.P., Pereira, 2001a and Oliveira, 2003), the process of school exclusion is developed starting from the association of the work to moral values, to personal effort, to a better future than that reserved to the youth with poor social insert, and as form of overcoming urban problems, such as the involvement with illicit drugs and marginality. On the other hand, the process of social-cognitive construction of the work among the adolescents starts from the moral valuation of working, independently of the context and of the conditions in which the work is itself processed. That is, typically, a situation of normative constraint, that leads the youths to reproduce the “appropriate” social speech, since its denial would imply in assuming a facet that is rejected by the social group.

Social representations, as forms of explanation that are elaborated by social groups, are used by the adolescents as a basis to understand the world around them, regarding its most diverse social objects. In order to be represented those objects must involve real or imaginary importance for their existence, identity, continuity, etc. This is the case of the themes related to the precocious work in the adolescence.

The structural approach known as theory of the central core proposes that social representations have their contents organized in two internal systems – central and peripheral –, each one of them possessing specific functions and characteristics. The few cognitive elements of the central system or central core are consensual, more stable, linked to the history of the group and something independent of the immediate context, and so they grant to the representation its basic meaning and organize the other elements of the periphery. On the other

hand, the peripheral system, that is constituted by a larger number of ideas concerning the represented object, makes the interface between the central core and the concrete situations and practices of the population, by incorporating their individual experiences and histories, and so showing itself as not just more sensitive to the influence of the immediate social context, but also more flexible in the orientation of the group members' behaviors (Abric, 1994; Sá, 1996, 1998; Oliveira, 1996; Oliveira, 2001b).

Starting from the above presented problematic situation, the objectives of this study were: to describe the representations of the social object "work" by students who work (outside the school, besides normal school work) and by those who don't do it, in a large Brazilian city, as well as to analyze the possible existence of a "mute zone" in those representations.

METHODOLOGY

Abric (2003, 2004) indicates two possibilities for the reduction of the normative pressure – that is to say, defense mechanisms of social order – in a given research situation, so that it could result in the expression of the hidden elements of a representation: *"to reduce the level of implication of the subject, through the substitution technique; or to reduce the normative pressure of the context, by moving the subject away from his/her group of belongingness and of reference, through the technique of changing the normative context"*.

The substitution technique consists in *"decreasing the degree of implication, in reducing the mechanisms of defense"*, through two research stages: *"the 1st stage consists in asking the subject to answer in his/her own name; and the 2nd stage in answering as if he/she was somebody else"*. (Abric, 2003, 2004)

In the present study we adopted a variation of the substitution technique, which involved not a displacement of the subject but a **manipulation of the inductor term** in a free association task.

We departed here from the possibility that a "mute zone" could also be created by the generality in which the object of representation is presented to the subjects, which would mainly engender general and normative answers. Then, a second stage, where some particular conditions would be specified, could maybe reveal those elements that remained "mute" because they were not explicitly provoked.

At a first sight, through this varied technique – that could perhaps be called of "complementation" rather than of substitution –, the degree of implication is enhanced instead of reduced, but I would like to insist that it produces some sort of liberation from social pressures, in the same way that is allowed by Abric's substitution technique.

As we see it, the subject's displacement for someone else – although from his/her close belongingness group – was accomplished by the change of the inductor term "work" for "adolescent who works".

Instead of requesting the subjects to just answer to an associative question focusing the theme "work", we requested from them two associative questions, one of which – "adolescent who works" – contained a strong implication for one of the studied groups.

They were interviewed two groups of adolescents, one group of workers and another one of non workers. The adopted procedure consisted in two stages:

1) to present to the two groups of subjects – adolescents who work and adolescents who don't work – the inductor term "work", and to request five associations to it;

2) to present to the same two groups of subjects a second inductor term – "adolescent who works" –, and to request five associations to it.

In this communication, the results that will be presented were obtained in the city of São Paulo, which is the largest and richer Brazilian city, of industrial economy, with more than ten million inhabitants, and that presents the typical problems of a great city: unemployment, poverty, marginality, environmental pollution, displacement difficulty, etc.

In this study, 724 adolescents were interviewed, being 506 workers and 218 non workers. These subjects were between 14 and 18 years old, and they were high-school students.

Although the study was not originally conceived in the methodological framework of the "mute zone", we believe that such a concept brings a rich contribution for understanding the results, at the same time that these ones can contribute for eventually enhancing that approach.

RESULTS

The precocious salaried work is a problem with particular characteristics. As a concept and a social practice, the work is object of hegemonic representations that are reproduced since the childhood and the adolescence. That reproduction, however, is developed without establishing any relationship with the individuals' lived reality. In this way, the unequal work relationships established with the young worker, the current unhealthy work conditions, the human exploitation accomplished through the work, don't interfere, in a first moment, in the reproduction of that representation.

It seemed to us from the beginning that the social representation of the object "work" formed by our subjects would contain some non explicit elements, that is to say, a "mute zone". In fact, to recognize oneself as a worker during one's own childhood and adolescence implies, firstly, in reproducing the hegemonic representation of the work, and only secondarily to recognize the unequal conditions in which that work takes place.

We observed, likewise Deschamps and Lemaine (1997) in their study about racism in Europe, that if we had accepted the first result obtained in the description of the representation of the work among adolescents who work, we

would have concluded that such representation was positive for the young worker and that the work itself didn't constitute a problem for them.

We'll present now the results of the 1st stage of the study that aimed to verify whether the fact of working interferes in the representation of the work itself. For that, we analyzed and compared two dictionaries constituted by the associations made by adolescents who work and by those who don't work. (Vergès, 2000)

Figure 1 – Comparison between the quadrants of distribution of the free evocations to the theme “Work”.

In Figure 1, the analysis of the structure and of the thematic content of the social representations about "work" shows as their probable central core, in the quadrant 1 (left superior), similar elements for the two groups of subjects: *money, responsible, essential, good, too much responsibility*, revealing a positive and normative content.

In the quadrant 2 (right superior), in the so-called first periphery, they are found the most important peripheral element – *tiresome* – showing some contradiction between the elements of the central core and those of the periphery, which adds a negative sense to the representation.

In the quadrant 3 (left inferior), denominated by Abric as a contrasting zone, there are the elements *independence, economic need, effort, to rise very early*, that reinforce both the senses of the central core and of the first periphery, at the same time that they bring a second meaning, that is to say, the economic need associated to work.

In the quadrant 4 (right inferior), we observe the elements of the 2nd periphery – *future, experience, maturity, learning, relationships, obligation, bad, devotion* –, that, although less important, associate a new functional sense to the representation, that is to say, the work as a learning locus and the future as a consequence of working.

Figure 2 – Comparison between the quadrants of distribution of the free evocations of the group of the adolescents workers, to the inductor terms “work” and “adolescent who works”.

These results present the comparison between the associations in the normal context (inductor term “work”) and those in a substitution context (inductor term “adolescent who works”) produced by the group of adolescent workers.

In the central level, work itself is presented, in the normal context, as a value and as a means of earning the life, demanding from the young worker a lot of responsibility. In the substitution context, the work itself is thought of as a means of facing poverty and of precociously becoming an adult.

In trying to better identify and to visualize the present differences in the results, we formulated a distinction between **specific elements** and **exclusive elements** of the representation. That distinction implied an activity of selection of

the present elements in the structural analysis by giving saliency to those that characterize the existent differences.

We defined as **specific elements** those that are identified as different in each quadrant, that is to say, those that don't appear in the same quadrant of the configuration in the normal context (or vice-versa), putting so in evidence the structural differences between the representations.

Figure 3 – Specific elements related to the inductor terms “work” and “adolescent who works”, among young workers

In this analysis, we identified as **specific elements** in central level, in the substitution context, two elements – *economic need* and *maturity* – that add a functional meaning to the representation of the work, associating it to poverty, and reinforce its positive sense, by substituting the predominantly normative elements of the normal context.

We can observe in the first periphery that the notion of future associated to work starts to do part of the representation, and is no more constituted as a less important element, located in the 2nd periphery, as in the situation of normal context.

Among the contrasting elements, located in the left inferior quadrant, the negative sense of the representation is expressed in an intense way, associating work to *exploitation* and to social problems (*get out of the street*), as an answer to marginality that comes as a first option to the youths of poor families.

We observed, among the elements of the 2nd periphery, the confirmation of the negative sense of the representation, indicated by the contrasting elements, as well as the significance of the work as a means of obtaining social respect and access to the consumption market.

We can, still, identify those elements that don't appear in any quadrant of the compared analysis. The **exclusive elements** of the representation refer to the words that don't participate in any quadrant of the analysis in the normal context (or vice-versa), highlighting the differences observed in the content of each representation.

Figure 4 – Exclusive elements related to the inductor terms “work” and “adolescent who works” among young workers

In the context of substitution, the negative elements of the representation – that are not observed in the normal context – get saliency, showing the consequences of the work in the adolescence for the young workers. We can still register, in that context, the *poverty* as decisive element of the precocious work.

In the normal context, the attitude regarding the work is positive, since the work is seen in its relationship with the future, because it facilitates the enhancing of knowledge, as well as the young worker's matureness and his/her social respectability, even if it is obligatory and demands a great dedication.

In the substitution context, the attitude towards the work is negative, since the work is seen as being determined by the economic need of the families and justified by the risk of poor adolescents to fall in marginality. It comes accompanied also by negative consequences for the health and for the scholarship of the young worker.

CONCLUSIONS

The comparison between the two contexts of data collection – normal context and substitution context – among young workers showed different images associated to the precocious work. One of them is legitimated by the moral speech and attenuated by the perspective of a future different from that of the origin family; the other is anchored in the legal speech, based in the right of being a child and in the indignation due to the exploitation of juvenile work.

In that way, we observe here the functions accomplished by representations that deserve prominence: the naturalization of the work itself; the opposition to the infantile work, as an abstract entity disentailed from the lived social context; the regulation, anticipation and justification of the social relationships lived by children and adolescents, and finally the prescription of behaviors and of practices considered socially licit.

The comparative analysis between the own work and of the other's work among youths demonstrated one particularity of the representations. The young worker doesn't represent himself/herself as such, and distinguishes two main images associated to the work, denying its adolescent condition through a peculiar form of distinction between the me and the other.

Thus, the data indicated the multiple facets assumed by the young workers' representations, sometimes legitimating the work under any conditions, and sometimes opposing to it or subordinating it to legal prerogatives. That double reference seems to work as a protection, in the measure that speaking about the other has the effect of withdrawing the young workers from the difficult conditions experienced by them in daily life.

As to its methodological aspect, this study corroborates Abric's statement according to which, in certain situations, the representation may not present itself completely to the researcher.

In this study we could observe the phenomenon described by Abric as "mute zone", which may be revealed in presence of a substitution situation, when some originally hidden elements are added to the central core or to the periphery, besides those already present in the normal context. That increment, however, modifies the meaning of the representation.

We also consider that the acceptance of that proposition has some important methodological consequences, and that them should be highlighted. A first consequence is that the researcher should be suspicious about his/her data, that is to say, he should wonder whether the data he/she had obtained really

reflect the fullness of the studied object. That suspicious posture can be productive if accompanied by a previous knowledge about the studied object.

The second question that the researcher should put to himself/herself is to how much social pressure involves his/her study object, and to which his/her subjects are then submitted. A massive positive answer constitutes one more indication that perhaps there are elements that, although not verbalized, belong to the studied representation.

A third necessary question refers to how to get access to those hidden elements. For that answer, Abric, Guimelli and Deschamps have already offered some indications that can be useful to the young researchers who decide to venture themselves in the seas, not always without secrets, of social representations theory and, particularly, of its structural approach.

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Figure 2 – Comparison between the quadrants of distribution of the free evocations of the group of the adolescents workers.

Students of High School – Adolescents Workers

Inductor Term: Work
n: 506

Inductor Term: Adolescent' Work
n: 505

<2,9		Evocation order	>2,9	
money	252	2,4	tiresome	124 2,9
being responsible	136	2,0		
essential	123	2,0		
good	104	2,4		
too much responsibility	94	2,1		
Frequency >79				
Frequency <79				
independence	76	2,8	future	75 3,1
economic need	64	2,0	experience	56 2,9
effort 61	2,6	maturity	53 3,5	
to rise soon	27	2,4	to learn	45 3,4
		relationship	39 3,8	
		obligation	35 3,0	
		bad	31 3,0	
		devotion	29 3,0	

<2,8		Evocation order	>2,8	
being responsible	183	2,1	independence	134 2,9
good	118	2,3	future	88 3,0
economic need	110	2,2	money	84 3,0
maturity	101	2,7	tiresome	63 3,0
Frequency >57				
Frequency <57				
too much responsibility	56	2,5	own money	56 3,1
effort	53	2,3	to help the family	52 3,0
lack of time	44	2,7	essential	35 3,0
experience	35	2,7	disturb studies	33 2,9
to leave the street	33	2,7	stressing	31 3,2
obligation	23	2,6	difficult	27 3,2
exploitation	20	2,5	to make purchases	27 3,0
bad	20	2,5	amusing	26 3,3
determination	17	2,7	to learn	25 2,8
		being respectable	24 3,0	
		to help	19 3,1	

Figure 3 – Specific elements related to the inductor terms “work” and “adolescent who works”, among young workers.

NIVEAUX	<i>Work</i>	<i>Adolescent' Work</i>
central core	money essential too much responsibility	economic need maturity
1^a. perif.		independance future money
contrasting zone	independence economic need to rise soon	too much responsibility lack of time experience to leave the street obligation exploitation bad determination
2^a. perif.	future experience maturity to learn relationship obligation bad devotion	own money to help the family essential disturb studies stressing difficult to make purchases amusing being respectable to help

Figure 4 – Exclusive elements related to the inductor terms “work” and “adolescent who works” among young workers.

NIVEAUX	<i>Work</i>	<i>Adolescent' Work</i>
central core		
1 ^a . perif.		
contrasting zone	to rise soon	lack of time to leave the street exploitation determination
2 ^a . perif.	relationship devotion	own money to help the family disturb studies stressing difficult to make purchases amusing being respectable to help