

The Social Representation of the Adolescent and the Adolescence in the School Environment

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ABSTRACT This study tried to characterize, from teachers', principals', students inspectors' and students' statements, the social representation of the adolescent and the adolescence, in an attempt to perceive how this social representation has been inserted into daily relationships in countryside schools of São Paulo, Brazil. The analysis shows that there is a social representation structure of the adolescent and the adolescence which is shared by all the segments analyzed, but there is no consistence of this representation when it is a question of specifying the characters in specific people.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study tries to characterize - from statements made by teachers, principals, student inspectors and students - the social representation of the adolescent and of the adolescence and realize how this social representation can integrate in the everyday relations at school.

Studies about social representation try to analyze the process of appropriation of the world by man. Social representation is understood as the assimilation process of reality by the person, a consequence of a process of integration of his experiences, of the information that circulates in his environment about a social object as well as the relations that he establishes with other people in his environment. Authors as Moscovici (1978), Herzlich (1972) and Ibáñez Garcia (1988), studying social representation have showed that it signifies, as a phenomena, a knowledge modality, the specific expression of a social thought that comes from established relations among men. We may configure social representation as the assimilation process of reality by the person, as the interpretation that he does of his reality. They are the affirmations that people make about their reality and about their interaction

with other men.

Social representation is a product of historical determinations as well as of the here and now and situates the individual in his world. It is built with experiences, knowledge, values and information that are transmitted by tradition, communication, the media and by education. In this way, social representation is a personal interpretation and at the same time it's not personal, because society imposes to the individual how it must be represented.

The empiric works about social representation try to access it, in general, by its verbal expression. In this study social representation of the adolescence and the adolescent was characterized from statements obtained through semi-structured interviews.

Twenty-four students belonging to 4 public schools in the State of São Paulo were interviewed: two schools with students from 1st to 11th grades (elementary, junior high and high school) and two schools with students from 1st to 8th grades (elementary and junior high school). We interviewed students from the diurnal and nocturnal periods, chosen at random. One female and one male student were picked from each class.

The teachers were selected for the interview based on the students' statements. During the interview the students were asked to indicate the teachers they considered good and the ones they thought had to improve. The teachers receiving a coincidence of positive or negative indications would be interviewed. Twelve teachers were interviewed where 8 received positive indications, 3 negative indications and 1 positive and negative indications simultaneously. We also interviewed 5 student inspectors and the 4 principals from the studied schools.

In the statements analysis we tried to

understand how the several components of social representation of the adolescent and of the adolescence articulate among themselves and around a nucleus or a central structure.

2. SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF THE ADOLESCENT AND OF ADOLESCENCE IN STATEMENTS OF THE INTERVIEWED PEOPLE

2.1 Statements of Principals, Teachers and Student Inspectors

Statements of principals, teachers and student inspectors point as strong characteristics of the adolescent as "having nothing in mind, having no worry about the future, being lost". These all due to lack of concern about studying, about a career, and the future, and a tendency of living life attached to the moment. Although several teachers mentioned that the students ask for orientation about career planning and further education, the present idea is that the adolescent just wants to "live life".

The adolescent is depicted as concentrated in the here and now, searching only for fun - "get from life as much as possible" - without worrying about the consequences. This idea of the adolescent worrying only about the immediate moment, about fun, about dating, image and appearance with nothing else in mind, seems to be reaffirmed when most teachers, principals and student inspectors see the adolescent as politically unaware and not worried about social problems.

However, adults point out that the adolescent is concerned about social ascension. The statements of teachers, principals and inspectors seem to demonstrate that the importance of the school for the adolescent lies in the possibility of social ascension, "to be someone", have a better job and define himself professionally. This is what the kids visualize getting from the diploma: "they probably come to school with the goal of social ascension, or "just to have a diploma", "for giving the school some value". But the statements also point out that for the adolescent school is a place to socialize, a place to stroll, to meet friends and dates. For them, the adolescent does not go to school to study or learn "nobody studies", "they come to school to go out, to stroll, to meet friends and dates".

The indiscipline of the adolescent student, a common characteristic pointed by the teachers, is considered a clue, or evidence of this lack of interest. This picture of the unconcerned and unruly adolescent is also present in the relation established with them, either in the sense of comprehension/approximation or in the sense of control/restriction. For example, a teacher with a negative indication, questioned - to be authoritarian/ to be liberal - when facing the unruly adolescent: "I avoid asking for too much... I emphasize the need to do the homework but I don't ask for it." To establish limits and controls are tasks that the principals also believe to be necessary, due to the contesting and troubled behavior that the adolescent presents.

In this representational context the meaning attributed to the school and the studies while one of the components present in this social representation, comes through, to reaffirm the image that the adolescent is not worried about anything and that he does not have objectives.

The people interviewed express, agreeing with the idea that the adolescent just wants to have fun without worrying about the consequences, certain preoccupation about the freedom of sexual behaviour and the use of drugs that is observed among the adolescents. Most people interviewed affirm that the lack of concern about the future and the lack of limits of the adolescent behavior, encourage irresponsibility, the use of drugs and the sexual liberation that, many times, can occur associated with entertainment.

According to this concept of a sexually liberated adolescent, in many cases using drugs and politically unconcerned, the teachers say that they try to orient the students in these matters, through discussions in classroom, text reading, speeches and videos about sexual education, drugs, pregnancy and the country's social situation. They try to provide the adolescent with information, advising them about how to react or behave in certain circumstances, in accordance with the concept they have that the adolescent is not well informed. Even so, sometimes, teachers question the importance of information to modify the behaviour, as this teacher says: "that is why I tell you that I don't know what the problem is. It isn't lack of information, because they have the information. But

we end up with some cases of undesirable pregnancy of adolescents that use drugs. I don't know what leads them to the non-prevention."

The principals also say it is important for the school to have orientation to deal with specific problems of the adolescence, at least on the use of drugs and about sexual education. They make an associative reference between adolescents and drugs, even looking like a "slogan" since, according to these principals, the addicted students are distant from school as they affirm: "if there is an addicted, we invite him to talk, but the addicted is in the school very little. He starts to attend and soon disheartens, goes away, drops school, ends up not staying."

Social representation needs justification, elements that maintain it in the people's conceptual universe. So, how do adults explain these representations? The teachers, principals and inspectors point to the changes occurring in the relations among parents and children, the lack of family structure, the evolution of society, changes made by questioning of traditional social values, high consumption, communications (TV, soap operas and magazines), and the lack of social perspective are factors responsible for this adolescent's way of life that lead him just to want "to live life" and that contributes to the liberalization of traditional values.

The conclusions are made considering parents-children relations. The adolescent is not alone, and in the construction of his social representation, the adult element is fundamental.

For the adults, the adolescent way of living is a result of a greater behaviour freedom he enjoys today compared with the one they had in their adolescence. The idea that seems to be present among most interviewed people is that parents do not impose limits to children anymore, do not emphasize how they must behave, do not determine what is right from what is wrong. However, the students, when talking about their parents, say they have with them a relationship based on control. There is, according to the students, a control that is imposed by all parents, independent of sex and if they do or do not work.

According to the interviewed students, their parents control the time to arrive home at night and the prohibition to entertainment and the leisure time depends on the academic suc-

cess, the places that they want to go and the companions chosen for the strolls. Sometimes, this control is seen as necessary.

Although some changes may have been occurring, parents still perform their authority on the children. There is limit and not total liberation for the adolescent. But the principals, teachers and inspectors seem not to admit these behaviours, because their statements about other parents, students parents, are not personalized, they tend to generalize. We found out that many interviewed people who have children, when talking about the relationship between parents and children, seem to believe that the parents do not impose limits to the children. However, when they talk about the relationship they establish with their own children, they say they are strict and demanding.

This way, they exclude themselves from the comments they make about other parents, affirming they have a different behaviour.

The statements point then to a total contradiction on what people think about themselves and about others – when they personalize and when they depersonalize.

In this study, the social representation of the adolescent and of adolescence is shown as an articulation between the adolescent-adult figures, belonging to this chart, where in one hand, is the image of self-affirmation behaviour of the adolescent, and in the other hand is the image of the adult insecurity facing this self-affirmation.

In the statements of principals, teachers and inspectors there is evidence of a social representation of the adolescent and adolescence. Nevertheless, what does the adolescent student think about adolescence and the adolescent?

2.2. *Statements of the Adolescent Students*

The students' speech is contradictory. In one hand it reflects the generic image of adolescence – live life, not worrying about the future, about work and school – and in the other hand, the doubts and uncertainties about his own future.

The interviewed students, when talking generically about the adolescent say: "I think adolescence nowadays is, in general, very disorganized, very 'bird-brained', they are not thinking a lot about life. I think they should think

more about the future, about their lives. Deep inside I think they don't want anything, they want to live the present and that's it, without worrying about the future". My father and my mother say "they (adolescents) think only about sex, drinking and fun. It's right because they don't think about school". At this point their statements seem just like the adults' about adolescent, which, however, goes against to what they say about themselves: "I hope when I am eighteen, I have something of my own, have saved money, without financial worry"; "I want to graduate, go to college and be a mechanical engineer".

In the group of statements, the concept that the student seems to generically elaborate about the adolescent is that he is irresponsible, not worried about the future, only wanting to have fun. However, he does not fit himself in this description, demonstrating concern about his future and with school, being someone, having things.

This contradiction between what they hope for themselves and the idea about the other adolescents is also evident in what they say about dating, sex and the use of drugs. We'll exemplify with some statements: "most of them are going into drugs, it's a big problem", "they have a very weak mind, they get easily into drugs", "the worst thing that can happen to me is to go in the wrong way, get drug addicted. This is the worst thing that can happen to someone", "the worst thing is to get into bad company, into drugs. I'm afraid. I choose the companies I want".

Contradictions of the same nature also appear in relation to dating and sex: "I think most people of my age, part of it just date for sex, but not me", "ah, it's very liberal, in everything, very advanced dating, I really don't agree", "everybody thinks that to have sex is a good thing. It can really be, but everybody is very young. I'm shy. My friends say they want it."

In the specific "I" there seems to be restrictions on sexual liberation and on the use of drugs by saying that they try to have different attitudes. They also affirm that their friends usually think almost the same way they do, sharing the same wishes and longings. However, these sole positions do not change the nucleus of the social representation of the adolescent. In this way,

the interviewed students distinguish the way they see the adolescent and the way they think about themselves and about their friends.

Personally, the adolescent hopes to have a good life, a profession, a stable financial situation, not worrying about work and a job, win in life and be happy.

For the students, the idea of a better future is related to social ascension, to the career, to status, to financial stability. These longings and wishes are shared by all, independently of sex, grade, school and family financial situation. Even if the reality they live in can determine different life expectations: go to college or finish a technical course.

The statements show that school and studies are seen as central for the realization of future expectations. However, the students also say the school is a place to social living, to meet friends, to stroll, and many affirm they do not like to study. However, even saying they do not like to study, several students also say that they like the school to be more demanding, because the teaching is very "weak". To corroborate these positions they affirm the good teacher is the one that really "teaches". In their statements, the students value, in the teacher, qualities as: dedication, will to teach, interest for the subject taught, not been in imposition of respect in the classroom (even if he has to impose limits for it – be authoritarian), show friendship and respect for the students, understand the students, be interested in their life and have a closer contact with them. On the contrary, they say the teacher they dislike do not try to teach the class in a way they understand, miss classes, skip the subject, don't clarify doubts saying that it is the student that does not pay attention, is angry, let them do whatever they want to and do not respect them.

They seem to believe they have to study in order to have a safe future and that it is the teachers' and principals' responsibility to force them to reach this goal. That is, try to stop what they believe characterizes them as a group: the irresponsibility, the day dreaming, the fun.

These positions reinforce the contradictions with which the interviewed students and adolescents struggle: they want freedom, leisure, fun, but they also want a "good" school and

"competent" teachers. They also reinforce the contradictions of their own image and the others – adolescents in general. "The others", as this student says, "don't think about anything. If they don't want to study they quit, start working and quit after one month. It's rare a young person that thinks about the future and what he wants".

The students' statements about the adolescent and the adolescence are not different from the teachers', principals', and student inspectors'. They also express the doubts and uncertainties about their personal future and the belief in school, in the studies and in work to realize future expectations. They do not fit well in the social representation that they elaborate of the adolescent and adolescence.

In the sixties prevailed the idea of adolescence as a time of social contention. The adolescent was seen as a transgressor, not worried, free, rebel, rule contester. The reference is the immoral young person, "junkie" (Masserman, 1971; Anthony, 1969; Foracchi, 1972; e Knobel, 1971). However, the studies done at the end of the 70's and in the 80's and 90's show that the young generation shares the social values, accepting, many times without questioning, the social rules aiming for social status, stable financial situation and to constitute a family by marriage (Reinoso, 1971; Nascimento, 1978; Paschoal, 1985; Cavalcante, 1977). The statements also show that the interviewed people many times, share the values of stabilization of the society they live in.

Finally, the social representation of the interviewed adolescent students seem to have established the adolescent as a person without perspective, without objective and irresponsible, that doesn't know what he wants, doesn't worry about the future, is unruly, just searches for fun, is free, not well informed, consumer, non-politic, individualist; and the adolescence as a time to live life, date, dance, have fun.

3. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The social representation of the adolescent and adolescence, according to the statements of the interviewed people, considers the image of self-affirmation behaviour of the adolescent – do what he wants – and the adolescence as a

time of less responsibility.

In the statements the social representation of adolescents and adolescence was done by a common nucleus: the lack of concern of the adolescent about his own future, the irresponsibility, the self-affirmation behaviour where several components articulate: drugs, sexuality, study, parents and adolescent relationship.

This idea that the adolescent does what he wants and does not accept limits and that the adolescence is a time of less responsibility is present in the adolescents and adults statements constituting itself in the nucleus of the social representation of the adolescent and adolescence built by the people interviewed. The other elements, the study, work, sexuality, drugs and the parents-adolescent relationship, gravitate around this nucleus. We can, therefore, conclude that in the elaboration of this social representation there is a nucleus or a central structure as well as other components that can confirm this social representation, although they are not poles that add but that tension each other.

The analysis done showed that, the collected statements, although coming from different people and contexts, social condition, age and schools, evoke traits and images that are common to all interviewed people, indicating that there is a tendency to homogenize the social representation of the adolescent and adolescence. The statements converge in some central points showing a perceptual stiffness that translates a social representation of the adolescent/adolescence.

It seems that there is the construction of a certain social representation of the adolescent and adolescence shared by all the segments analyzed, but not the consistence of this representation when it is about specifying the characters to specific people. That is, the other parents are the ones who do not control their children or the other adolescents are the ones who are free, use drugs and are irresponsible about the future. But these positions in the specific, in the singular and every day do not alter the social representation nucleus that is done about this age range, in a way that it seems to be homogenized. The social representation, we remember here, is shared by people, in as much as it is not merely a personal position

about the reality, because the context impose how this representation must be, even with individual traits. The social representation is the personal sense that the person elaborates about his reality, but although it is incorporated as a personal vision of reality, it is built from the culture and its economic, historic and social determinations. Possibly the theories, the published researches, the ideology and the communications build up and put out an image about what is to be adolescent that is generalized by the society, and turns into an integral part of the social representations, contributing to create the point of view by which the social representation is elaborated. Nevertheless the selection of aspects and crystallization is done in and by the social concrete interactions because, of course, what passes by the social representation finds support in real behaviours.

However, the permanence at the homogenization level, makes difficult the captivation of the individual, how he personally faces other people, things, society, but ends up influencing the interpersonal relations and therefore, the teacher-student, principal-student, inspector-student relations, who live situations full of subjectivity and, though, must be clarified.

The social representation sets selected elements to identify people, groups and events. The incongruities and the misunderstandings are left on the side. What remains is the construction that is done socially by the selection of characteristic factors that temporarily crystallize in the mind of each one. However, when referring to things that occurred to oneself, the contradictions, the perceptions and incongruent actions return, the divided and misunderstood articulation of attitudes and behaviours, of actions and solutions.

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