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OBSERVING A MINUTE OF SILENCE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract

By January 2015, France had experienced several terrorist attacks. At each time, the French government asked all the institutions and especially the teaching institutes to observe a minute of silence. It was the case at the university of Cergy-Pontoise, located near Paris where the study takes place. The aim of that research is to focus on the youth's sense of belonging to one society, especially the students belonging to the licence degree. Secondly it could be a way to discover which representations are hidden behind their speech, in that case as a proof or not of their political involvement or at least of their civil-minded sense. The data were collected first around two months after the "Charlie hebbo" attack and a second time two years after that event, in order to analyze the evolution of their representations. Our purpose is also to explore the evolution between comments made in the heat of the moment and when the subjects have some time to think more deeply about it.

Keywords: youth, political involvement, social representation, context

INTRODUCTION

A lot of studies suggest that young people's political involvement has decreased steadily over the last few years. In fact, it is less complicated. Although young people's social roles in society are on the increase their interest centres are changing: ecology or charity work seem to be more attractive to them. (Quéniart & Jacques, 2008). In June 2016, the CREDOC [Centre de Recherche pour l'Etude et l'observation des conditions de vie (Research center for the study and observation of living conditions)] published a research which showed that French youths (between 18 and 30 years old) would like to be involved in the city life/as citizens even if they were not very confident about the political class. A third of young people are volunteers in an association, it is often a sports association and when they are getting older also a cultural one. But few of them are involved in a militant association like a union or a political party. The mobilization of young French people seems also more sporadic For example, in 2015, one in three young people declared that they had already signed a petition or defended a case on the internet. Studying values, Bréchon and Galland (2010) have already showed similar results. Young people agreed more than the adults with the values of autonomy, but also they are less concerned by the notions of social involvement. Young people are less present in the political area but it does not mean that they are completely depoliticised (Roudet, 2014). In a research focused on the meaning of democracy for youth, Roudet (2014) shows that even if their electoral participation is low, they choose different expressions of political commitments such as signing a petition or joining a protest march. In an article about the values of (the) young European people, Olivier Galland (2014) showed that young people are closer with the adults belonging to the same nationality than with the other European youth. But also, they are less traditional and less integrated than the older people, even if there are some differences between European states. All these results demonstrate that involvement in the city life as citizens/ in civic matters/ does not automatically mean political involvement for young people.

In this paper, the following hypothesis is made: When young people observe a minute of silence, it could be interpreted as the expression of their belonging to a nation, sharing some values or feelings with the other members of the nation. Our purpose is to try to explore which representations are hidden behind that behaviour and which kind of evolution could be noticed. Indeed, it is also a way to explore the evolution between comments made in the heat of the moment which is always problematic (Filiu, 2015) and the expressed beliefs when you have enough time to think more deeply about them.

We make the hypothesis that the analysis of the young people's discourse about the fact of observing a minute of silence could give some information about their values and be a proof of their involvement as citizens of the State.

After defining multiculturalism and context, the concept of social representation will be examined. At the end the results will be set out and discussed.

1. MULTICULTURALISM AND CONTEXT

1.1. Multiculturalism

The French dictionary Larousse defines multiculturalism as a "coexistence of several cultures, often encouraged by a proactive policy". If we consider the first part of that definition, all the subjects of our research actually live in a multiculturalism world. All of them evolve within multiple cultures, they share their peers' culture (Pasquier, 2005) and their French cultural background, and some of them who live in immigrant families are influenced by their parents' culture of origin. This finding implies to explore exploring both of these contexts.

In the past, Berry (1970), studying acculturation and its impact on individual psychology, found three components of multiculturalism which are a demographic fact, an ideology and at least some public policies which promote respect and acceptability of diversity. Considering the structure of multiculturalism from three interacting components leads to the idea that it has a variable character depending on the context. Later, Berry (1997) stressed on the fact that "*the central aim of the field of cross-cultural psychology has been to demonstrate the influence that cultural factors have on the development and display of individual human behavior*" (1997: 6) in terms of acculturation and adaptation. But also the process of acculturation depends on three characteristics of the considered groups: their mobility, permanence and voluntariness (Van Oudenhoven, Stuart & K. Tip, 2016). These authors stress on one important point which must be taking into account: "*the mutual change that occurs when two or more cultural groups come into contact with one another*" (ibid, 2016: 146). A process of adaptation is not a process that takes place in a single sense, but it is characterized by mutual interactions between the national population and the newcomers (Sabatier, Phalet & Titzmann, 2016). The adaptation could be different according to the characteristics of each group and their willingness to be involved in that process.

An important condition for cultural groups to mingle harmoniously with each other is "*when both diversity and equity are present, integration and multiculturalism are found*" (Berry & Ward, 2016: 441). Parisian suburbs are a location where multiculturalism is a part of everyday life. A lot of young people face different cultures: the context where they live but also their parents' culture of origin and in the end but not at least the teenagers' culture that they share with peers. They evolve in different cultural contexts but also at their intersections as we will discuss later.

1.2. Context

When you are studying social representations, it must be taken into account the notion of context (human and physical) and as well as how its structure is envisaged and conceptualized because of its main influence on everyday life and on the elaboration of beliefs. But the question is what do we really mean when we speak about cultural context? Valsiner (2000) wrote that any context corresponded to a cultural organization which was the fruit of a cultural construction. It has a great role in the structuration of relations between people because it influences the human roles and status. Thus, it will initiate variations of the representational models of reference in interpersonal relationships. We will discuss this notion of context, as the reference medium of the individual, from the model developed by Super & Harkness (1986) in order to analyse a child's development and called "developmental niche". That "developmental niche" has three main components which interact constantly: the physical and socio-economical context, the practices or customs and the representations that the authors called "ethnotheories" which could be considered as naïve theories culturally printed. In this research, we have decided to make no differences between ethnotheories and social representations, both are based on a social consensus and correspond to a kind of common sense knowledge. That concept of "developmental

niche” could be used in the case of young people and be called a “niche of evolution” (Boyer, 2013). The context, where young people evolve, could be considered as a succession of “niches of evolution”. This statement gives it an infinitely dynamic character. Indeed, the “niche of evolution” and its three components are influenced by the people by their presence and the situation. The subjects of our study are most often at the intersection of several niches of evolution because of their family history and also their place of residence. It can be assumed that during an interaction there is a system of permanent regulation between the three components of the “evolution niche” and the subjects in the presence.

In this research, we are trying to analyse not only young people’s beliefs, their representation about a specific object the minute of silence, but also the evolution of their beliefs with time. Secondly it is essential to specify the concept of social representation.

2. SOCIAL REPRESENTATION

Elaborated by Moscovici, in the beginning of the 60s,” Social representations should be seen as a specific way of understanding and communicating what we know already” (Moscovici, 1983). The social representations were defined as a naïve theory (Jodelet, 1989). They are the result of a collaborative elaboration which has a practical goal in everyday life. Social representations « *contribute to the establishment of a common reality shared by a social community.*¹ (Jodelet, 1989: 36). That concept comes from a social consensus but it also entails an individual aspect which corresponds with the way the subject takes it over. In fact, a social representation works like a framework or an interpretative grid of (the) social reality. It provides a code for social relations. We hypothesize that the way to designate is a translation of the way that people imagine the environment where they develop. This is why we decided to collect verbal data. Analysing their discourse seems to be a valid means to reach a part of the young people’s representation. Each individual has a dual role, appropriating the representation and participating to its elaboration (Jodelet, 2008). Such a perspective makes it possible to consider the subject as an actor in the development of representation. It justifies the choice of using this concept in this paper which deals with one aspect of expressing social representation, verbalization. That statement of the existence of the two mechanisms proves that it is not a static and immutable concept but it is subject to variation. The modalities for the elaboration of the representation and thus its anchorage in reality give it a profoundly dynamic character especially from the peripheral elements which, apart from their role of quasi-instantaneous decryption of the situations, are vectors through which the changes and the evolution of social representations are carried out.

Meaning and representation can not be separated as Moscovici (1983) or Albric (1994) demonstrated in their respective research. One object does not exist by itself. A social representation is always a representation of something for someone. And we stressed on the idea that the sense is linked to the environment and its specific characteristics. Social representations are deeply embedded in the cultural context.

The definition elaborated by Wagner (1999) is always still up to date “*Social representation theory is a social psychological framework of concepts and ideas to study psychosocial phenomena in modern societies* (1999: 95).” He highlighted the fact that social representations are deeply embedded in historical, cultural and social conditions. In summary, a social representation is the ensemble of thoughts and feelings being expressed in people’s verbal and non-verbal behaviors in a specific cultural context. It is both representative of the group's thinking and of the representation of the subject herself or himself.

3. METHOD

The data were collected first around two months after the “Charlie hehbo” attack and a second time in 2017, nearly two years after that event, in order to analyze the evolution of their representations.

¹ The translation is done by the author.

3.1. The choice of questionnaire

The choice was made to collect verbal data because they constitute means to reach their representation. In research about young people's oral expression, Moirand (2009) showed that the way to express something or somebody always translates the subjects' representation of the context (human and physical), its rules and the way to interact.

All the subjects have to fill up in a short questionnaire which consists of two open questions. In this paper, the question concerning the representations related to the minute of silence will only be dealt with, the second question concerning the media treatment will be the subject of a later analysis. We made the choice of using a questionnaire rather than an interview, because we thought that the subjects would feel freer to express their beliefs than if they were in presence of somebody. When you collect verbal data, you always have the risk that subjects hide a part of their representation because of the mechanism of defence and the desire not to lose face and to show a nice "picture" of themselves (Goffman, 1973).

Respectively, 61 (Sample 1 in 2015) and 65 (Sample 2 in 2017) questionnaires were collected.

3.2. The subjects

All the subjects were volunteered to take part in our research. They are between 18 and 20 years old (mean age = 19, 68 years in 2015, mean age = 18, 26 years old in 2017). When we collected the data, young people were in further education. They attend the university of Cergy-Pontoise on a bachelor curriculum.

In the beginning, we would like to have the same number of boys and girls in order to investigate the gender question. But it is not the case here because the girls seemed to be more interested than the boys by the research, more of them agreed to participate. You can find the number of participants and other details concerning the two samples in the table below.

Table 1. Characteristics of the two samples (%)

Items	Sample 1 (S1) (n= 61)	Sample 2 (S2) (n = 65)
Genre		
Female	59	69
Male	41	31
Religion		
Atheism	31.2	40
Christianity	31.2	29.2
Islam	24.6	26.2
Other	6.5	0
No answer	6.5	4.6
Nationality		
French	54	43
European	8.3	20
North African	18	20
African	16.4	10.8
others	3.3	6.2

In the table 1, the data show that a great number among the young people of the two samples live in a cross cultural environment, at home (S1 = 46% and S2 = 57%). They are part of the second generation of immigrants. The majority of their parents are from the African continent, which is explained by the past links between France and some African countries (particularly with the Maghreb or Mali). The percent of Christians or Muslims are nearly the same. The difference is rather at the level of atheists who are more numerous in the second sample.

Although both samples are relatively low, the responses obtained may lead to reflections on the possible influence of gender or religious affiliation and the migratory process experienced by a number of families. Now the results will be discussed.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As we said before, the data is being analysed. So in this paper, the first results will be presented. Even if the data collection is anonymous, there is a great variation of the length of their comments inside the same sample and also if you compare the two samples together. It could be due to interpersonal differences but also to the period of data collection. In 2015, they were twice as long. The young people were more eloquent, they needed to express themselves because they were very shocked. They felt concerned by the phenomena of terrorist attacks. They evolved in a world where everybody, politicians, medias, a great part of the citizens, seemed to be feel involved. During the second one, it was as if they are used to that kind of event. They seem to have integrated it. Their Feeling of revolt was less expressed or more hidden. At a personal level, the variation of length could be explained as a psychological mechanism. Some of them could were possibly too shy to express themselves, they do not dare or want to show one aspect of his/ her face (Goffmann, 1973) or they did not find the right word to exactly translate their beliefs and feelings. The will to show an appropriate “face” may induce a control of information (Crowly, 2017).

Two years after the terrorist attack against the satirical newspaper “Charlie Hebdo”, only one subject mentions “I am Charlie” against 23% in 2015. That statement could be put in relation with the influence of the environment discussed before, here especially the historical environment. In 2015, it was just after the rallies against the terrorist attacks against Charlie Hebdo and the Hype Casher supermarket. At that period, the state authorities, political parties and associations legitimised rallies which were considered as a protest against national values and especially the freedom of expression. So we can notice that more subjects find that “observing a minute of silence” is normal and necessary in the first sample (46%) than in the second one (20%), or where even some of them said that it is a duty (S1 = 26,23%; S2 = 10,77%).

4.1. *The Nation and Republican values*

The sample 1(42.63%) mentioned more often the notions of nation than the sample 2 (9.23%). The republican principles were evoked by 27.87% of the subjects interviewed in 2015 and were not quoted by any in 2017. The same observation can be made for freedom of expression (S1 = 13.11%, S2 = 0). The term citizen is little quoted, only 8.2% (S1) and 1.53% (S2). But all of these results show that the notion of nation and its values has diminished between the two data collections. It seems less present in their minds. These results could be explained again by the influence of the historical context on the peripheral elements of social representation. Indeed, in 2015, the young people of the study had just experienced the bombings of Charlie Hebdo and the great civic event that followed, while in 2017, unfortunately, other attacks had been perpetrated which were no longer aimed only at journalists, but any Individual regardless of origin or religion. The general atmosphere has changed, freedom of expression and republican fraternity which were very present in 2015 (Truc, 2016) are not yet the main arguments of public discourse. Taking into account the principle of solidarity and national union, the level of citation highly decreases from 67,21% (S1) to 23,07% (S2). At that time, those values were spreading through French society. When we compare the two data collections, it could be noticed that there is an evolution from the expression of national values to more personal criteria.

4.2. From the Nation to the Individual

The tribute to victims and their families is present in both samples, but is less quoted in 2015 50.81% (S1) than in 2017 83.07% (S2). It is even the criterion most cited. It is as if the subjects do not yet make a link between the behaviour, observing a minute of silence and the fact of sharing national values. They focus more on the individual aspect. They express their sadness for the victims, they do no longer express the defence of Republican values. The majority share a feeling of injustice because innocent people have been killed or hurt without distinction. So they find that it is important to participate in observing a minute of silence (S1 = 16,4% ; S2 = 50,77%), whereas in 2015, notions of normality and necessity were more present in their remarks. With time, the expression of respect has increased and even doubled (S1 = 34,42%, S2 = 66,15). In the both sample, the majority of young people agree with the idea to of observing a minute of silence.

37.70% of the first sample and only 3.07% of the second sample mentioned religion but it is always to associate that item with the notion of tolerance and the fact that we should not make assimilations between Muslims and terrorists. For the moment, it is not possible to correlate this speech with the practices obedience of the subject, even if some authors had already highlighted the importance of religious factors (Mayer & Tiberj, 2016).

4.3. Against the minute of silence

The number of critics is very low and all of them come from young Muslims men from the second generation of immigration (S1 = 6.5%, S2 = 7.69%). If the minute of silence is described as useless or meaningless, these subjects often regret the hypocrisy linked with that kind of behavior. All of them said that it is not fair but some of them explained that the terrorists are maybe desperate and even if their behaviour could not be forgiven, they understood their motivations. They highlight the non-recognition of other killings in the world such as the barbarism suffered by the Syrian people. It is possible to join the analysis of Simon (2018) which shows in a study among Muslim pupils after the Charlie Hebdo attack that one of the difficulties is to familiarize them with the dominant norms which are often rejected by the subjects. In order to maintain a group's social identity, the person activates the central elements of the social representation (Zouhri & Rateau, 2015). The pursuing goal is to show a good "face" to his/her belonging group or to another group that he/she finds attractive.

CONCLUSION

In short the analysis of the first results show an evolution of the expressions of social representation strongly linked with the characteristics of the context and its evolution, through the action of peripheral elements. In our two samples, the majority of the youth agree with the idea of sharing a minute of silence, but motivations have changed. Their discourse has evolved from the national, republican reference domain to a more personal dimension. Given the number of subjects, we must be cautious in the interpretation of the results, but it is obvious that this offers new perspectives for reflection. Analysis must be carried on in order to explore the relations between immigration and beliefs concerning the minute of silence.

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