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Adolescent behavior at an interface between social representations and personal experience

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ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOR AT AN INTERFACE BETWEEN SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE [1]

Abstract: Theory of social representations (SRs) by S. Moscovici (1984) provides a comprehensive background that explains how common (social) communicative structures are generated, shared and used in everyday life. We can see the SR as a social system with relatively stable core and more dynamic and changeable periphery. We can expect that both the core and the periphery influence human representation and action, but they participate differently under different conditions. We consider the hypothesis that the roles of certain peripheral parts of social representations become more important in such situations, which are highly familiar and relevant to both the individual and his informal group. In this case the situation and situation-based action are experienced and communicated more and its representations are more elaborated in these interactions. The more general function of core aspects of SRs is essential within subjectively less familiar or quite new situations. Our results support the assumption that the core of social representations and their peripheries participate on individual representations differently, depending on both subjective familiarity and in-group familiarity of the situation.

Key words: social representation, communication, action, experience

Introduction

One of the most important philosophical challenges in psychology is dichotomy individual – general. There are many human individuals facing immense individual situations, who are ready to communicate their experience each to other. Human mind strives from ancient time for the general entity, which underlies variability of apparent world. Themes of Platon's ideas or Plotino's archetypes overlap to modern science. There is a substantial need to understand ontological, functional as well as other aspects of these general phenomena. With respect to its ontological quality, the relation to physical reality should be taken into the question. We can see it as a cognitive content: a consensual individual ideas lasting in the time, resulting from both a shared experience with identical conditions of reality and, as pointed out Markova (2003), from dialogical communication of

the experience. Consensual reality does not imply that individuals hold the same views, rather that there is an awareness and understanding of the common views by all individuals, such that even though an individual may not personally agree with one or the other views, they can easily engage in discussion involving one or the other viewpoints (Rose et al., 1995).

The role of communication in contemporary social science promote hypothesis about its role as source of social meanings too. On the other hand, there are some ideas or themas, which remain unchanged for hundreds and thousands years. A question should arise, whether a development of such general social entity is possible or not.

Theory of social representations (SRs) by S. Moscovici (1984) provides a comprehensive background that explains how common (social) communicative structures are generated, shared and used in everyday life. We can see the SR as a social system with relatively stable core and more dynamic and changeable periphery (Abric, 2001, Guimelli, 1998). The central core gives a social representation its meaning. We can find it and name it as a usually bipolar dimension or rather as a set of dimensions. Peripheral elements are organized around the central core and they constitute an interface between the core and actual situation (Abric, 2001). They allow an individual to adapt to more stable and general facets of social representation to actual situation that the individual should comprehend and act. The periphery enables an individual both to experience his/her own situation as a singular one and to communicate it within his/her group and compare his experience with the experience of the others. Since the individual experience beyond a discourse raises tension, the social representations, which set up in the course of dialogical communication, restore comprehensibleness of actions in the group (see Markova, 2003).

We can expect that both the core and the periphery influence human representation and action, but they participate differently under different conditions. We can theorize that the roles of certain peripheral parts of social representations become more important in such situations, which are highly familiar and relevant to both the individual and his informal group. In this case the situation and situation-based action are experienced and communicated more and its representations are more elaborated in these interactions. The more general function of core aspects of SRs is essential within subjectively less familiar or quite new situations.

The relative stability of core representations in contrast with variability and dynamics of immense group interactions, which build the periphery of SRs, underlines the need to explain relations among common experience, their communication within the group and results for SRs. We shall follow the question whether communication of shared experience or mere communication without immediate experience will cause a variability of representations. We expect that real life experience-based communication is more powerful to bring real variability into (peripheral) SRs and consequently also to the core SR.

Hypothesis

We can consider the thematisation of a situation that is common and relevant among small group members as a result of a communicated shared experience among the members of a group. On the other hand, thematisations of a generally well-known, but less experienced situation follow a rather more general core of social representation of an adolescent and a middle-age person.

Method and sample

There were three groups of research subjects – classmates (65 altogether), aged from 16 to 17. Every class-group came from different grammar schools in the city of Brno. There were not any interactions among participants during examination.

The participants were asked to solve two problem situations. The first situation showed a person (man/woman) lying on a street, who may be in a need of help. The second situation presented a person (man/woman) wanting to get a job that is very important for her/him. The two situations were selected under conditions as follow:

- Adolescents should be familiar with both of these situations but they have to have different factual contact with one and the other.
- These should be applicable to different social-class groups or age groups.

The first "need of help" dilemma shows a situation, which is well-known but unusual in everyday life. It is dealt with more in media than experienced in a life. On the other hand, the second "job-seeking" situation is more common among students. It shows competition in achievement of a position or status. We expected that many aspects of competitive "job-seeking" situation are more frequent in everyday life of grammar-school students and it is more communicated and experienced among them than the out-group helping situation.

Each of these three groups of classmates was further divided into three subgroups by chance. The task for these subgroups differed in a person who should act in these two problem situations. Members of the first subgroup described their own possible action; members of the second subgroup described action of their friend and finally members of the third subgroup presented what they would expect as an action of a middle-age person (man/woman).

We have applied the method of thematic analysis (Tyrlik, Macek, 2002) to analyze written solutions of situations. All solutions were analyzed in order to find the main thematic dimensions of social representation, which create a background of respondent's understanding of the situation.

We can consider thematisation of the "job-seeking" situation as a result of a communicated and shared experience among members of class group, whilst thematisation of the "need of help" situation follow rather a more general core of social representation of an adolescent and also of a middle-age person.

We have compared three groups of classmates without respect to actor's position (subject himself, friend or middle-aged person (man/woman) in order to find differences in use of themes, which could be explained by inter-group interaction and communication of common experience.

On the other hand, three groups, which were created according to actor's position (without respect to class-groups), were compared in order to find differences, which could result from common general social representations of an adolescent person (man/woman) and a middle-aged person (man/woman).

The Chi-square test statistic (SPSS) with exact correction was used.

Results

Regarding the "need of help" situation, we have found three bipolar dimensions:
- activity – passivity,
- concern – unconcern,
- conditional (pre-evaluation of injured person) – unconditional.

These three dimensions have been combined into five categories in which we can find unilateral use of the dimensions:
1) concern & activity (to evaluate state of injured person, to call for an ambulance, to provide immediate help)
2) a) conditional & unconcern & activity (the subject will leave the place if the injured person looks like dosser, in another case the subject is ready to call an ambulance)
   b) unconditional & concern & activity (the subject will pre-evaluate the injured person but is ready to call an ambulance regardless of the injured person is a dosser or not.
3) passivity (hesitation the subject is in doubt with his ability to help)
4) unconcern (It's none of my business)

These five unilateral thematic categories result from two themes:
- activity – passivity, concern – unconcern
- conditional – unconditional, activity – passivity
Both these themes constitute frequently and generally used social representations.

Analysis of the "job-seeking" situation has revealed four dimensions:
- activity – passivity,
- honesty – dishonesty,
- expectation to be successful – expectation to be unsuccessful
- positive emotion – negative emotion

These four dimensions were unilaterally used in eight thematic categories:
1) passivity (to do nothing)
2) honesty & expectation to be unsuccessful (fair play, a failure causes a resignation)
3) honesty & activity (fair play, maximal preparation)
4) honesty & expectation to be unsuccessful & positive emotion (fair play, despite the possibility of a failure, the attempt gives a useful experience to a subject
5) dishonesty (deception)
6) dishonesty & negative emotion (deception causes the subject's negative emotion)
7) honesty (fair play)
8) dishonesty & activity (deception with maximal preparation)

We can find unitary theme honesty – dishonesty in solutions of this situation, which is variously extended by at least three other dimensions. This moral dimension of social representations is combined with representations of various aspects of personal and situational conditions.

An expected difference between the ways the two situations, described above, are thematised was found. There are two complex general themes in the first (less familiar) situation, which were polarized in five thematic categories. On the other hand, there is one general moral theme in the second (more familiar) situation, which is not only polarized but also variously completed in eight thematic categories. The dimensions as the expectation to be successful – the expectation to be unsuccessful or positive emotion – negative emotion, which were found in this situation, indicate that the thematisation was influenced by results of individual personal experience.

We did not find significant relation between gender and frequency of any individual category.

We have compared frequencies of categories, mentioned above by groups, which were divided according to class-group and actor's position criteria. Despite the fact, that there were weak statistical significances found, we can ascertain many visible differences.

Regarding the "need of help" situation, there is clearly no relation among thematic categories and class-group (graph 1). On the other hand, although not significant, certain relation is apparent when the relation among thematic categories and actor's position groups were taken into account (graph 2). We found out a statistical significance (p=0,05) when frequencies of actor's position groups were compared separately in the category 2 – conditional & unconcern & activity (graph caption "dosser-ambulance-unconcern"). The visible differences in the cases of other categories, when these were processed separately, were not significant, probably due to low frequency.

The analysis of solutions of the "job-seeking" situation shows quite opposite results. Although the statistics is not significant (p=0,08), the categories are partially related to class groups (graph 3). We found a statistical significance (p=0,018) when frequencies of class groups were compared separately in the category 3 – honesty & activity (graph caption "fairly – preparation"). Conversely, no relations among categories and actor's positions were found (p=0.341), except category 5 – dishonesty (graph caption "deception")(graph 4). Although not significant, we can find low frequency when an adolescent subject presents himself or herself at the expense of a middle-aged person who is expected to cheat frequently. There are apparent low frequencies in categories when the activity of an adolescent himself or herself is expected. Whereas the differences between positions of himself/herself or of friend and of middle-aged person we can explain by core social representation of a middle-aged among adolescents, the difference between position of himself/herself should be understood as a result of self-experience and self-system.
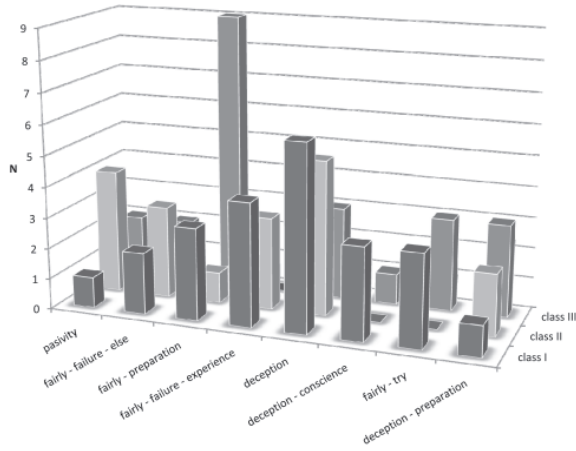
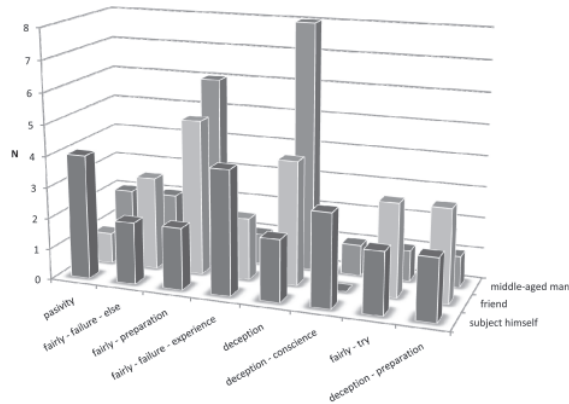**Graph 1 Solutions of "help-situation": Comparison of classes**
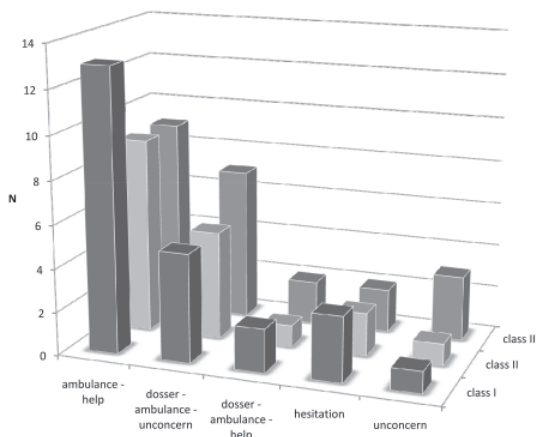
Graph 2 Solutions of "help-situation": Comparison of actor's positions
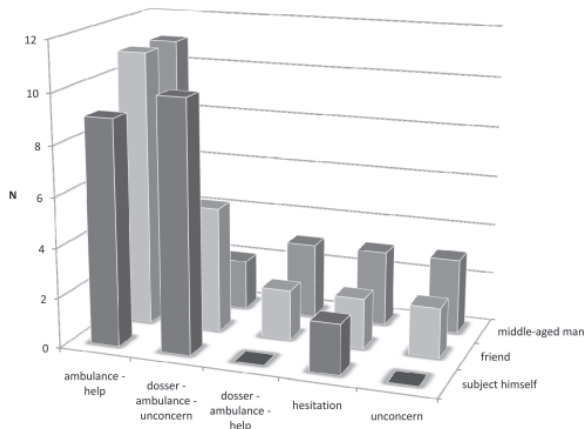
Graph 3 Solutions of "job-situation": Comparison of classes

Graph 4 Solutions of "job-situation": Comparison of actor's positions

Discussion

Our results support the assumption that the core of social representations and their peripheries participate on individual representations differently, depending on both subjective familiarity and in-group familiarity of the situation. The communication of common experience, obtained within familiar and relevant situations, takes the thematisation away from the general core of social representations and introduces variability to their periphery.

We suppose a person utilizes social representations differently with respect to some conditions, which are given by relation between subject and situation. We chose the condition of familiarity for this research. It is probably not the only important condition.

Difference between morality and achievement, which is also clearly evident in background of our two situations, should be emphasized too. We tried to choose the valid situations but many doubts can arise. We should find the situations, which are applicable to different age groups. Although grammar school students do not apply for a job yet, the competitive and achievement oriented aspects of this situation are commonplace for them.

Since the experimental design, which we have used in this research, did not allow us to increase the number of participants (the number of students in a class is limited), statistic analysis of the data is in some respect weak. Nevertheless we have used exact correction of the chi-square test, we found rather a borderline significance than strongly significant relations.

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VLIV PROLÍNÁNÍ SOCIÁLNÍCH REPREZENTACÍ A VLASTNÍ ZKUŠENOSTI NA CHOVÁNÍ ADOLESCENTŮ

Teorie sociálních reprezentací (SR) tvoří efektivní nástroj, který umožňuje popsat a vysvětlit, jak člověk pojímá každodenní situace, s nimiž se setkává a v nichž jedná. SR můžeme chápat jako semiotevřený sociální systém, jehož jádro je obecné a relativně stabilní, ale mnoho prvků na okraji tohoto systému (periferii) se velmi dynamicky přetváří v závislosti na konkrétní zkušenosti utvářené v jednání jednotlivých lidí. Komunikace této konkrétní zkušenosti pak může v delší perspektivě podmínit změnu také jádrových částí systému. V naší práci ukazujeme, že vnímání situací, s nimiž má určitá sociální skupina každodenní zkušenost, je více závislé na komunikaci o této zkušenosti v konkrétní skupině, zatímco vnímání situací vzdálených každodenní zkušenosti je více závislé na obecnější a stabilnější jádrové struktuře sociálních reprezentací. Naše výsledky potvrzují předpoklad, že se SR uplatňují na vnímání situace různým způsobem v závislosti na tom, nakolik je určitá situace běžná a významná pro jedince a lidi v jeho bezprostředním okolí, s nimiž svou zkušenost komunikuje.

Klíčová slova: sociální reprezentace, komunikace, jednání, zkušenost