

CHILDREN AND POVERTY

SOME COMMENTS ON I. GALLI AND R. FASSANELLI

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Galli and Fassanelli's paper on "The social representation of Poverty: A Naples pilot study" offers interesting ideas for applying the theory of social representations to the study of poverty. The authors have used diverse strategies for gathering data (open and close questions, linguistic and iconic strategies) and have chosen children as subjects of their research. I appreciate very much the 'openness' and 'fresh air' of the research strategy intended by the authors to cope with the study of poverty. At the same time I have my reservations concerning some data displayed on the paper (e.g.. do all the data correspond to responses given by subjects or are they recoded categories?), some descriptions of the data (e.g.. "Looking at these data, it's easy to point out that rich children's lexicon is much wider *and more articulate* than poor children's one" (page 6) or "The most relevant data is that subjects related to a lower socio-economical status ... altogether showed *larger agreement* on a wider amount of substantives in comparison with subjects related to a higher status" (page 7)), and some inferences made from the data ("Probably, agreement shown by subjects related to a lower socio-economical status could be explained with a deeper involvement in the "poverty object"" (page 7)). Anyway, despite these problems I think the paper arises deeper questions related not only to the study of poverty but to the study of social representations in a more general way. I will focus on two of these questions.

Social representations are cognitive and symbolic products about a social object created by a group and used to allow communication among the members of that group (Moscovici 1961/1976); ... organizing principles of the positions adopted in the symbolic relationships between actors in a defined group of social relations (Doise 1990). That is, social representations are symbolic products of the "thinking society" and are related to the positions the social actors take.

The authors want to work on Social Representations of Poverty to have a possibility of understanding "how people think of poverty, how they feel it and how they represent it to themselves (page 2). In order to achieve this aim they get data that are as "pure" as possible (page 1), reasonable culture-free (page 2), using children. The authors also want to understand the "markers of differences" (page 4) between poor and rich, and they use children of poor and rich areas of Naples.

Children as culture-free beings

The authors suppose that working with children one can get pure or culture-free data. This assumption is difficult to hold from the point of view of the Theory of Social Representations which holds a non linear view of the ontogenesis of acquiring social representations (Moscovici 1990).

From this developmental constructivist point of view children are not "tabula rasa", culture free beings. Young children in the sample have been socialised in a given culture and have acquired a given language. They have internalised social representations (Moscovici

1981) of the community they live through the use of language and through the interaction with adults and peers. In words of Bruner (1986) "is not just that the child must make his own knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture" (p. 127). This leads us to the field of the genesis of social knowledge. Some authors distinguish three different types of genetic transformations of social knowledge (Duveen & Lloyd 1990), the socio-genetic, ontogenetic and micro-genetic. It is through this micro-genetic aspect, that is social interaction, that the ontogenetic aspect of social representations are acquired and changed. Children need to be considered as social beings, living in a cultural context from birth, and that means that they live in a symbolic world of a given society (Duveen & De Rosa 1992). For instance, several researchers have found that children have acquired the evaluative aspect of nationality or economic relations (Tajfel 1981, Piaget & Weil 1951; Lloyd & Duveen 1990) before the conceptual aspect of these objects. Children have acquired, at least, some of the central values of their own culture before they have access to its conceptual structures. The adoption of the paradigm of social representations as an explanation of the specific modes of knowledge of the social world and the processes through which they are constructed leads to the abandonment of the view of acquiring knowledge as a rigid linear and cumulative sequence. At least both, children and adults, use consensual and reified forms of knowledge (Moscovici 1981).

Poor and rich and markers of differences

One of the aims of the authors was to understand the "markers of differences" between poor and rich. Traditionally two kind of objective criteria have been used to define poor and rich. The first one is the economic criteria which has been used more often in studies within a given society. These criteria, measured by economic income in different ways, suppose a continuum from being very poor (nothing = "lack of something") to being very rich (all = "full of something"). The second one is the "way of life" or "group" criteria which has been more often used cross-culturally by sociologists and anthropologists and supposes sharp distinctions between "cultures" of poor and rich. The authors have chosen the first criteria in order to define poor and rich children.

The creation of the welfare state in Europe after the II World War has supposed big changes for an objective definition of poor and poverty considering, for example, the universalisation of education and medical care. Poverty has been defined as a "way of life" in classical anthropological and sociological studies on poverty. For example Lewis (1961) defined poverty as "a design for living which is passed down from generation to generation". According to this author, when applying this concept of culture to the understanding of poverty we must draw attention to the fact that poverty in modern nations is not only a state of economic deprivation or of absence of something. It is also something positive in the sense that it has a structure, a rationale and defence mechanisms without which the poor could hardly carry on. According to this kind of definition the culture of poverty would apply only to "those people who are at the very bottom of socio-economic scale, the poorest workers, the poorest peasants referred to as the Lumpenproletariat" (Lewis 1961, xxv). From this point of view, Lewis was able to detect different "traits" in this culture of poverty: economic, social and psychological traits. This definition of poverty as a "way of life" leads us to posit that if we want to see the "markers of differences" between poor and rich, it is not enough to take a definition of poor based only on the economic criteria. We certainly need more, we need a group definition more than a definition based on an economic continuum. While the former takes into account the context for the

production of knowledge the latter tends to decontextualise and individualise the content of knowledge.

As far as the social representation of poverty is concerned, it would be interesting to understand this dichotomy (economic continuum versus "way of life" definition) from the point of view of "reflexive" and "nominal" groups (Wagner & Elejabarrieta 1994). A reflexive group is understood as a group which is defined by its members, where the members know their affiliation and have criteria available to decide who else is also a member. If a group is delimited by an arbitrary criterion introduced by an external observer and this criterion does not figure within the group members' consciousness, we are facing a nominal group. These members of a reflexive group elaborate the rules, justifications, and reasons for beliefs and behavior collectively within their group-relevant daily social practices.

This distinction between reflexive and nominal groups would help us to posit poverty within the class of polemical social representations (Moscovici 1988, 221), where group divisions and associated everyday ideologies are much more salient than with common-sense knowledge in general. These polemical representations are generated in the course of social conflict, and they characterize subdivisions of a society, and determine antagonistic relationships between groups.

Anyway, my comments may have decontextualised the original intention pursued by the authors when conducting this pilot study which just pretended to be a pilot study. I have tried to go beyond those intentions by discussing these two issues which not only concern the authors but also a part of the research carried out in social representations. The authors have realized that "social representations are much more than just one subject among others in the psychological study of the child" (Moscovici 1990, p 169), although when asking a poor for a "dining-room" they would still be far from Jesus Sanchez's intentions for his children: "I want to leave them a room, that's my ambition; to build that little house, one or two rooms or three so that each child will have a home and so they can live there together" (Lewis, 1961, 507). At least, social representations are acquired and changed through the use of language and interpretive abilities, and language and communication codes "passes along the "genes" of social class from generation to generation" (Bernstein 1973; 1975).

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