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THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF POVERTY: A NAPLES PILOT STUDY

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Abstract: In our opinion the study of poverty has to be considered essential for social psychologists today; their efforts should be devoted to obtain fast and direct social benefits. We think that the main theoretical problem is represented by the "re-definition" of the object "poverty". The pilot phase of this research is based on three separate studies carried out with different samples. The aim of the research is to get acquainted with attitudes, perceptions and the social representation of poverty. In order to get data as "pure" as possible, only children entered the study. So the obtained results will set up the basis for a wider research project.

Social psychologists must face strongly the problem of poverty. Their aim has to be devoted to obtain results characterized by an immediate heuristic value and quick social effects. Nevertheless, social studies on poverty have not yet reached a realistic phase in Italy. The European Community approached the theoretical aspect seriously, and an Italian "ad hoc" committee provided appropriate data. In spite of that, the "poverty problem" has still to be defined more precisely and its psycho-social meaning better understood. Sociological research about "poverty" is today highly advanced (Cole, 1991; Chiappero Martinetti, 1991; Guidicini & Pieretti, 1988; Guidicini, 1992; Negri, 1990; Sarpellon, 1992a, 1992b) but psychological scientific contributions specifically concerning this social object are quite rare (Barbiero, 1981; Calvi, 1992; Carotenuto, 1976).

The first problem to approach is represented by re-defining the object "poverty". Everybody has his own moral and political ideas about it, but it is just as certain that nobody knows the ideas of the others.

A certain indeterminacy and social importance of the concept of poverty is perhaps responsible for the progressive loss of a commonly accepted meaning. Therefore the first step to re-define this concept is to create appropriate "research tools". These tools will give us the possibility to understand how people think of poverty, how they feel about it and finally how they represent it to themselves.

The present pilot study is composed of three different studies carried out with various samples. Its goal is to assess the attitudes, the perception and the representation of poverty. In order to obtain a first series of reasonably "naïve" data, only children participated in the study: children who attended the 4th (age between 9 to 11) and 7th (age between 11 to 13) level of the compulsory school system ("primary school" plus "secondary school").

One of the goals of this pilot study is to set up a research tool which is quick to administer and easy to decode. Such a tool should also give us the opportunity to single out the role of some socio-cultural variables within the complex of the social representations of poverty.

Study 1

Method

The aim of the first study was to study subjects' attitude towards the poverty object and to draw out a "dictionary" of poverty.

314 subjects, both sexes, attending the 4th and the 7th year of the compulsory school participated in the first and the second phase of this study. 74 of these were attending the 4th year of a rich "primary school", 90 were from a 4th year poor school class, 83 were from the 7th year of a rich "secondary school", and 67 were from a 7th year poor school class. Additional 231 male and female subjects were utilized for the third phase of the study.

Phase 1: the subjects were asked to freely associate as many words as possible to the stimulus word poverty. Scheduled time was 10 minutes.

Phase 2: Subjects were asked "to draw poverty", then to put down in writing the answer to the question: "What is poverty?". Instructions for the second phase of the study were the following: "In your opinion, what is poverty? I would like you to illustrate with a drawing how you imagine poverty". And then: "Your drawings were all very beautiful; so I would like to ask you something more: explain to me in your own words what poverty is". Scheduled time was 30 minutes.

Phase 3: 231 subjects, 120 of a high and 111 of a low socio-economic status, were asked to give a definition of themselves, choosing five adjectives out of twenty (five of which concerned poverty). The adjectives used in this auto-definition were the following: tender, miserable, sweet, sensitive, autonomous, strong, gossipy, envious, uncomfortable, aggressive, intelligent, fearful, disadvantaged, brave, tidy, intuitive, penniless, needy, rational and fragile.

Instructions for this phase of the study were the following: "Choose five of those adjectives written on the blackboard to describe yourselves". Scheduled time was 10 minutes. The above described tests were all carried out collectively. The collected data were processed by qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Results

In general the rich subjects provided 333 and the poor subjects provided 210 different

Table 1
Primary school subjects

Rich		Poor	
Poor	58%	Money	44%
Money	39%	Poor	40%
Alms	23%	Homeless	21%
Homeless	19%	Wealth	18%
Dirty	19%	Hunger	17%
Ragamuffin	18%	Charity	14%
Charity	15%	Sadness	14%
Misery	15%	Peace	13%
		Love	10%

Table 2
Secondary school subjects

Rich		Poor	
Hunger	49%	Hunger	34%
Misery	40%	Misery	24%
Wealth	17%	Money	24%
Sadness	14%	Poor	21%
Suffering	13%	Sadness	16%
Unemployment	12%	Homeless	13%
Alms	12%	Unemployment	12%
War	12%	Alms	12%
Money	11%	Illness	12%
		Loneliness	12%
		Dirty	12%
		Wealth	10%
		Vagabond	10%

substantives. Looking at these data, it is easy to point out that the rich children's lexicon is much wider and more articulate than that of the poor children. The most frequent substantives are presented in Table 1.

The most frequent substantives from subjects attending the rich and the poor "2nd secondary school" are presented in Table 2.

The most relevant result is that subjects of a lower socio-economic status showed larger consensus on a wider amount of substantives in comparison with subjects of higher status.

The observed differences in consensus can probably be explained by the deeper involvement of the lower status than the higher status children in the issue of poverty.

The same subjects who participated in the first phase of the study entered the second phase. A mixed drawing/verbal approach (Galli & Nigro, 1987; Nigro, Galli & Poderico, 1989) was used to assess the social representation of poverty. In previous studies such an approach already has proven to be useful. Our methodology can be considered original because the drawings were taken as the starting point and less weight was given to the verbal data.

First we will briefly describe the content of the drawings, then we will continue with the content analysis of the answers given to the question "What is poverty?".

Conforming to our expectations, most of the subjects (94%) personify poverty, they represent it as the most classical of the stereotypes: a beggar who asks for alms (63%). Most of the drawings include two people: a beggar stretching out his hand and another person giving him some money. Nevertheless, some subjects only draw the beggar, many beggars (for example: a mother with a small baby in her arms) or many people. Sometimes poverty is represented as "the poor man", "the tramp", but also as "the black man", "the drug-addict", "the gypsy". Only 6% of the subjects do not personify the concept of poverty and represent it through symbols or deserted "settings".

Table 3
"What is poverty?"

Categories	Primary school (M+F)		Secondary school (M+F)	
	Poor N=90	Rich N=74	Poor N=67	Rich N=83
Poverty as lack of ...	30%	25%	18%	27%
Poverty as the poor Consequences of pov.	13%	16%	10%	12%
Evaluations	12%	10%	15%	15%
Poverty as action	9%	11%	10%	8%
Church influence	9%	8%	8%	5%
	2%	3%	5%	10%

In order to classify the answers to the question "What is poverty?", some categories were compiled which are shown in Table 3. In this table we list only the most representative categories.

Most of the subjects describe poverty as a lack of something (for example a lack of home, food, job, money). Many subjects tend to personify the idea of poverty, in fact, they identify poverty with poor men. Sometimes poverty is also represented by its effects (for example: hunger, illness, death, marginalisation). Many subjects describe poverty by means of evaluations, usually negative. They define poverty as ugly, very ugly, unfair. Other subjects mention an action as signifying poverty. For primary school subjects such an actions is "begging for alms". Secondary school subjects choose actions like stealing, selling drugs and taking drugs.

Catholic culture seems to influence some subjects' ideas. We observe that many children try to define poverty through the dichotomy "poor in spirit" versus "poor in money".

The above six categories, are listed in Table 3. Besides these, other (less significant) categories have to be taken in account. We consider them as equally interesting and related to a deeper reflection about poverty. We mainly want to emphasize those answers which refer to the causes of poverty (unemployment, lack of institutions, existence of rich people). Attention has to be given also to those answers where the role of mass-media influences the "information component" of the social representation.

The subjects in the third phase of study 1 had been asked to define themselves by choosing five out twenty pre-selected adjectives. As expected, no rich children chose the following adjectives: miserable, uncomfortable, disadvantaged, penniless, needy. But, not in accord with our expectation, also poor children did not define themselves by adjectives related to poverty (only 15% of children attending the "scuola media" depicted themselves as "needy" and 12% as "disadvantaged"). Looking at the data, we are led to think that poor children are relatively unaware of their low socio-economic status; they seem to see poverty as a condition only related to others.

In order to verify this finding, an additional sample - 54 subjects of a low socio-economic status - were asked to define themselves by choosing 5 adjectives out of 20. Five of the 20 words were related to wealth: well-off, comfortable, lucky, profiteer, autonomous. These

data confirm our interpretation: 54% of the subjects define themselves as "lucky" and others as poor.

Study 2

Method

The aim of this study was to find certain objects which can be used as "markers" of social status. One hundred-twenty-eight subjects of both sexes attending the 4th year of primary school and 157 subjects attending the 2nd year of the secondary school were included in the study. They came from several schools placed in rich and poor districts of Naples. One half of the sample was asked to imagine an empty room and to furnish it as a "rich dining-room". The same subjects were then asked to repeat such a procedure for a "poor dining-room". The second half of the sample received the same instructions but in the reversed order. Instructions for the second study were the following: "Close your eyes and imagine an empty room. Furnish it in order to create the dining room of a rich house". And then: "Close again your eyes and imagine an empty room. Furnish it in order to create the dining room of a poor house." Scheduled time was 20 minutes. The above tests were all carried out collectively. Verbal materials were content analysed.

Results

At first sight the variables sex, age and status do not seem to play a primary role in determining objects as status markers. In fact it is easy to detect a high grade of concordance among children's choices. On the one hand our subjects selected as "status-symbol objects" the following: large, ancient and valuable pieces of furniture, silver and gold plate, famous artists' paintings, crystal chandeliers, sophisticated video equipment. On the other hand, the most frequent selected objects to illustrate poverty were: broken, old and dirty pieces of furniture, kitchenware and furnishing, lamps (as opposed to crystal-chandeliers), black and white (even broken) television equipment.

In conclusion, the objects are characterised by oppositions, as, for example, dirty versus clean, dark versus bright, old versus new.

Study 3

Method

The aim of the third study was to get an impression of the social representation of poverty from subjects of different age, sex and socio-economic status.

121 subjects of both sexes participated in this study: 37 subjects were attending a rich "primary school", 25 subjects were attending a poor "primary school", 24 subjects were attending a rich secondary school and 35 subjects were attending a poor "scuola media" from Naples.

Subjects were divided into small groups, homogeneous with regard to sex and school classes. They were asked to participate in a group discussion following a semi-structured scheme. During the interaction, some inputs were suggested, for example: future projects, good conditions to realize such projects, possible obstacles. The purpose of these inputs

was to bring children gradually to face the item of poverty and then to define it. The scheme of the semi-structured interview was as follows:

1. I would like you to tell me which are your plans for the future. For example, which are your personal plans for the future?
2. Which are the necessary conditions to realize your plans?
3. Who or what will allow you to be successful in your life?
4. Does poverty exist in our society?
5. What is poverty?
6. In your opinion does poverty hamper the achievement of your plans?
7. Who are the poor?
8. What does a poor man do?
9. How much must a person earn per month in order not to be poor?
10. How much does one need to have to be considered rich?

Scheduled time was about 20 minutes. All these group discussions were tape-recorded. Verbal productions were content analysed.

Results

In order to single out some categories of the semi-structured interview, a simple content analysis was employed. Among these categories, some were similar, almost identical, to those categories described in the second phase of the first study.

The answers revealed full awareness of the existence of poverty by our subjects. Once more poverty is described as a "lack of something" or identified with "poor people". In fact, when answering the question "What is a poor man?", children describe somebody "lacking something". Sometimes they consider the poor man is even responsible for his condition: he is *not able* to become part of the society, he *does not feel* like working. We would like to stress that such statements were not frequent and were produced by children. Such defensive answers are probably related to a sense of guilt because of the implied social unfairness.

The answers to the question "What do the poor do?" basically followed the trend shown by the other studies. In this case "the action" is not only "begging for alms" but also "looking for a job". Thereby children showed that they had a less fatalist and less resigned representation of "the poor". They finally ascribe to the poor the "power" of interfering in their own conditions.

Answers to the question "How much has a person to earn in a month in order not to be poor?" show a limited sense of reality according to money: one million lire a month is enough not to be poor.

Answer to the question "How much is it necessary to have to be rich?" children selected a series of classical "status symbols": villas (51%), money (34%), automobiles (27%), jewels (16%). In particular they also ascribe a certain importance to work (17%) as an antidote to poverty.

Conclusion

As we mentioned before, we feel that social psychologists have to focus their attention urgently on the great social problems. Among these, poverty can surely be considered as a central one. From the several possibilities to deal with this object, we chose the theory of social representations as a viable model. The principal aim of the three studies is to know how people reconstruct this social object. Such reconstruction is based on a redefinition of

poverty. From our children, rather than from other people, we were able to attain a definition which was neither original nor unexpected.

Our studies gave us some indication of the viability and functionality of the instruments. While the use of the free associations allowed us to know the semantic field of poverty, the interview technique, which on other occasions has been demonstrated to reveal most interesting points, in our studies has not produced anything different from the most classical and foreseeable stereotype of poverty, i.e. as "a lack of something", personified as "a man begging for charity". If we evaluate this instrument from a superficial cost/benefit perspective, it does not seem advisable for further studies on "poverty". But we should not forget that the answers to certain interview questions about poverty have allowed us to assess the evaluative aspects of the representation. Poverty was evaluated as "very ugly and unfair"; poverty is hunger, thirst, cold, or, more factual and less symbolically, unemployment, misery and death. Additionally, the role played by the Catholic Religion was suggested by some answers produced during the interview. The use of adjectives in the self-evaluation appeared as an important technique which allowed us to identify certain defensive mechanisms. Also, the technique used to identify objects as status symbols has been efficient enough to warrant its future use.

Some children identify poverty with "the poor people" although many of them reject such a simplification; they have a more sophisticated image of poverty and see it as a social problem. As a conclusion we could say that many children try to solve the problem of poverty even if they were not specifically asked such a question. Thereby they demonstrated a certain anti-fatalistic and anti-deterministic view on poverty. These children feel that unfairness and inequality of life at least have to be discussed, if not solved by some sort of social commitment.

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