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Social Representations of Human Rights Violations: Further Evidence

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Abstract

Social representations of human rights violations were investigated in a questionnaire study conducted in five countries (Costa Rica, France, Italy, Romania, and Switzerland) ($N = 1239$ young people). We demonstrated that respondents organized their understanding of human rights violations in a convergent way across nations. At the same time, systematic variations characterized opinions about human rights violations, and the structure of these variations was similar across national contexts. Differences in definitions of human rights violations were also identified by a cluster analysis. An extended definition was related to critical attitudes toward governmental and institutional power abuses, whereas a more restricted definition was rooted in a fatalistic conception of social reality, approval of social regulations, and some tolerance regarding institutional infringements of privacy. An atypical definition was anchored either in a strong rejection of social regulations or in a strong condemnation of more or less immoral individual actions linked with a high tolerance for governmental interferences. These findings support the idea that contrasting definitions of human rights coexist and that these definitions are underlain by a set of beliefs regarding the relationships between individuals and institutions.

Key words: Social Representations, Human Rights, Shared Meaning, Individual Differences, Anchoring.

Social Representations of Human Rights Violations: Further Evidence

Social representations are defined as commonsense theories on topics of societal relevance. The emergence and the development of such representations often presuppose a common reference system to abstract and general concepts of expert knowledge, which become objectified and diffused in lay knowledge. While circulating in the public sphere, concepts are transformed into concrete elements, images, or examples, which are easier to use in everyday language (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983). During this process unfamiliar concepts are connected to more familiar ones. Such anchoring accounts for differences in the manner of processing expert knowledge, given that people have different previous knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. Therefore the construction of a social representation involves shared references to common meaning systems by people who position themselves differently in this common framework. Analyzing social positioning is an important methodological device for linking the study of a common reference system and its differentiated anchoring in other symbolic systems (Doise, Clémence, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993; Elejabarrieta, 1994).

Such an approach is particularly useful for the study of lay representations of human rights. These rights are defined at a general and abstract level in various declarations, which are disseminated into the public. Hence, it was shown how students of 38 national groups apprehended in a similar way the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Doise, Spini, & Clémence, 1999). In everyday life, human rights issues become sometimes the topic of virulent discussions, which are not so much

related to general and abstract standards as such, but to their relevance to particular situations. Indeed, the question that frequently arises is whether specific actions or circumstances are to be considered violations of human rights.

This paper presents a study on the social representations of human rights (HR) violations in five different countries. We resume and further develop the study of Clémence, Doise, de Rosa, and Gonzalez (1995; see also Clémence, Doise, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1994) on this topic. One reason that led us to revisit this previous study is that thanks to the diligence of two Romanian colleagues, professor Rodica Stanoiu and doctor Horia Vasilescu, additional data from a sample of youngsters in Bucharest have reached us after the first report on the samples of Costa Rica, France, Italy, and Switzerland was accepted for publication. One of the main findings of the study with samples from four countries was the significant amount of common understanding of HR issues. Hence when new data from Romania arrived, we were particularly interested in verifying the extent to which commonality was also reflected in responses of young people who four years before completing the questionnaire had witnessed the dramatic societal change engulfed in the end of the Ceausescu regime.

We should stress that our aim is not to account for differences between national contexts or for possible specificities in the responses of Romanian participants. Using a large set of samples from countries around the world, Doise et al. (1999) demonstrated that variations between national contexts in opinions about HR issues were related to characteristics of the national contexts (for example, indicators of human development, assessment of HR enforcement, self-reported experiences of

injustice, or value priorities). In the present study, we could not conduct similar analyses given that our sample only included respondents from five countries. Moreover important differences in the composition of the samples prevented us from interpreting variations between countries. Obviously, respondents in each national context share specific experiences, attitudes or belief systems influencing their opinions on HR issues. However, our goal in the present report is to demonstrate that strong cross-national convergences can be highlighted despite variations at these levels. Thus, intercountry differences will be reported only for descriptive purpose; we intentionally resisted the temptation to speculate about the meaning of such differences.

At the occasion of integrating new data, we wanted to test more systematically than in the previous reports the idea of cross-national convergences in the social representations of HR violations. We examined to what extent respondents of various countries share a common understanding of what is or is not a violation of HR. The same search for commonality was also extended to the organization of opinions on other related topics, such as critical attitudes toward various governmental interventions, governmental and managerial infringements of privacy, social regulations, individual initiatives, and agreement with fatalist statements. In addition, we tried to demonstrate that cross-national convergences were also found at another level. The idea of a shared meaning system does not imply that all individuals hold the same opinions. Usually, strong variations characterized opinions on topics of societal relevance. Here, we examined to what extent the structure underlying variations in

opinions was common across national contexts. In other words, we tested the idea that similar principles organized variations in social positioning in each country.

This paper goes beyond the previous reports in another important way. Indeed, one of our goals was to investigate instances of social positioning which deviate from the dominant pattern. To study social positioning in a more detailed way, we proceeded here to an assessment of a typology of respondents. In recent studies (Doise et al., 1999), such a procedure, based on cluster analysis, proved especially useful for studying anchoring of social positioning. Anchoring was also studied in the previous report (see Clémence et al., 1995, Table 9) where it was found that the number of situations classified as violations of HR was related to a more reserved attitude in the realm of governmental initiatives and queries on the part of government and business firms. However other variables were not directly related to the extent of one's definition of HR violations as assessed with an overall score. Hence in the present report, we investigated more specifically different kinds of violations that may account for differences in overall scores, and checked if a more careful analysis of individual differences allowed detection of more complex links with anchoring variables.

Our analyses of anchoring patterns focused on opinions regarding the relations between individuals and institutions. According to our framework, social representations can be conceptualized as organizing principles of symbolic relationships between individuals and groups (Doise et al., 1993). From this perspective, beliefs about the relations of individuals to institutions are of paramount

theoretical importance. Institutions play a prominent role in the regulation of individual behaviors; they can be conceived of as setting limits to individual freedom, but also as protecting individuals or groups against undesirable outcomes and as safeguarding their rights. Individuals' willingness to relinquish to their freedom and their propensity to restrict interventions of collective entities in their lives constitute a key aspect of our investigations.

The analyses presented in this report follow the three-phase model of studying social representations (Doise et al., 1993). First, we highlight what can be conceived of as the common field in the organization of a social representation, and we demonstrate that this organization is shared between the five countries included in our sample. The second phase focuses on variations in social positioning. We provide evidence for the idea that a similar structure organizes these variations in each country. Next, we distinguish several groups of individuals who do not share the most widely spread definition of HR. In other words, we construct a typology of respondents. The third phase is devoted to the links between this typology and anchoring variables, in particular individual attitudes toward power attributed to authorities, initiatives given to individuals, and value priorities. In this phase, we will also pay attention to differences related to participants' age, as indicator of their progress in socialization.

Method

Participants

Participants were secondary school students or high school students from five different countries: Costa Rica, France, Italy, Romania, and Switzerland. We do not claim that these samples are representative of each national context; they were convenience samples in the sense that we were fortunate to have access to these populations. To homogenize the size of the five samples, we reduced, through random selection, each national sample to about 250 respondents. Table 1 shows the percentage of younger and older participants, as well as the percentage of male and female participants for each sample. This table indicates that the Romanian and Swiss samples included a higher proportion of younger participants, whereas the French and Costa Rican samples included a higher proportion of older participants ($\chi^2(4, N = 1236) = 54.90, p < .001$). The samples were composed of a fairly similar number of male and female participants, except for the Romanian and Italian samples, which included a higher percentage of women ($\chi^2(4, N = 1231) = 50.87, p < .001$).

Questionnaire

The first analyses were performed on a set of 20 items presenting various situations involving violations or limitations of individual rights. Some of these situations (for instance, situations of racial discrimination, imprisonment without trial or legal assistance, starvation) could easily be referred to classical definitions of HR contained in the Universal Declaration. Other situations, dealing with the rights of

children or with family affairs were less explicitly related to Articles of the Universal Declaration. And lastly, some situations dealing with economic inequalities or health matters (prohibition of smoking, hospitalization in case of contagious illness) were apparently not covered by official definitions of HR. Participants indicated to what extent each situation was a violation of human rights on 4-point scales: “certainly not” (1); “not really” (2); “yes maybe” (3); “yes certainly” (4).

The questionnaire also included other sections in order to study how respondents’ positioning in relation with HR violations was anchored in their positioning in related fields. We describe briefly only those sections related to the goals of this report; more details about the measures are provided in the result sections. Participants were asked to indicate whether various actions of the government, such as suppressing elections or the right to demonstrate, were acceptable “under some circumstances” (1) or “never” (2) (Governmental actions unacceptable, 11 items). They also rated whether specific inquiries of government and business management, such as asking about the political orientation, the religion, or the health of someone, were “fair” (1) or “unfair” (2) (Governmental and managerial inquiries unacceptable, 12 items). Participants indicated whether they considered that various social regulations, such as vaccinations or wearing helmets on motorcycles, infringed individual freedom: “yes” (1) or “no” (2) (Obligations as infringements of individual freedom, 8 items). They were asked whether various individual actions, such as bribery or cheating, were acceptable “under some circumstances” (1) or “never” (2) (Individual deeds unacceptable, 11 items). Participants expressed their

level of fatalism on a set of statements starting with the words “No matter what we do, there will always be...” and followed by, for instance, “rich and poor”, “good and evil people”, or “superior nations” (Fatalism, 8 items). In each case, they mentioned whether the statement was “true” (1) or “false” (2).

Respondents were also asked to indicate which one of three values they consider the most important: “freedom for all” (1), “equality for all” (2), or “solidarity between all” (3); and whose affair it is principally to defend HR: the affair of “everyone” (1), of “the government” (2), of “international organizations such as the United Nations Organization” (3), or of “associations such as Amnesty International” (4).

Results

Common Understanding across National Contexts

In the present case, the idea of shared meaning is related to the fact that the perception of HR violations is organized according to a shared hierarchy. In other words, there should be a large consensus between members of the population studied to claim that some situations are violations of HR to a greater extent than others are. They should share the same evaluation scale, graduating the situations from the clearest violation to the most ambiguous.

The means for the 20 situations for the total population are mentioned in Table 2. The hierarchy largely matched official definitions of HR violations. Indeed, situations such as the imprisonment or condemnation without a lawyer’s defense,

obliging children to work, or racial discrimination were clearly classified as HR violations. Infringements of political rights and fundamental liberties (freedom of opinion, movement, or religion) and violations of the rights of individuals in precarious situations (children, prisoners, people dying of starvation) were also clearly identified by participants. On the other hand, several situations were perceived as being more ambiguous. Among these situations were the prohibition of smoking, the confinement of contagiously ill people, and the inequalities of income.

To what extent was this hierarchy shared across national contexts? The means for the 20 situations as a function of national context are mentioned in Table 2. To test the degree of agreement or concordance between the ranking of the 20 situations for the different national contexts, we used Kendall's W . This test was highly significant ($W = .78, \chi^2(19) = 73.79, p < .001$); which supported the idea of a common basis in the cognitive organization of HR violations between the five national contexts. This strong consensus was not incompatible with some variations between national contexts. Indeed, several situations elicited different responses in some national contexts. A MANOVA performed on the 20 situations clearly supported this conclusion: the interaction between situation and national context was highly significant, $F(76, 21299) = 18.18, p < .001, \eta^2 = .25$. However, Kendall's W allowed us to demonstrate high convergence in the ranking of these situations across national contexts. As we mentioned earlier, the goal of the present report was to test the hypothesis of cross-national convergences, rather than to account for differences

between national contexts. The same search for commonality was tested for the five sets of anchoring variables.

Governmental actions unacceptable. Average rejection rates concerning governmental infringements of various rights were respectively, for imprisonment without trial: 91.0%, obliging children to work: 85.1%, use of coercion to make people confess: 80.0%, suppressing elections: 78.2%, suppressing TV broadcast critical of government: 73.1%, prevention of freedom of movement: 71.9%, undertaking war: 62.2%, listening in to people's phone conversations: 59.3%, suppressing right to demonstrate: 58.3%, death penalty: 50.0%, and expulsion of foreigners: 46.2%. Convergence of ratings for the five populations was highly significant ($\underline{W} = .76$, $\chi^2(10) = 38.10$, $p < .001$).

Governmental and managerial inquiries unacceptable. Answers about the acceptability of governmental inquiries showed a comparable rate of convergence ($\underline{W} = .79$, $\chi^2(6) = 23.68$, $p < .002$) and such convergence was even higher for inquiries by business management ($\underline{W} = 1.00$, $\chi^2(4) = 20.00$, $p < .001$). Ratings of agreement with governmental inquiries were, for religion: 20.2%, political opinions: 33.6%, health: 54.3%, mastery of host country's language: 56.3%, drug abuse: 65.6%, criminal record: 70.5%, and occupational status: 71.3%. Proportions of participants agreeing with inquiries by management were respectively when the topics were religion: 12.3%, private life: 32.4%, militancy in unions: 50.4%, criminal record: 71.4%, and health: 84.1%.

Obligations as infringements of individual freedom. Proportions of participants who considered social regulations as infringements of individual freedom were, for vaccinations: 11.7%, wearing a helmet on motorcycle: 14.4%, school attendance until 16 years old: 20.7%, showing one's ID to police officer: 27.4%, no smoking in a public place: 31.0%, compulsory military service: 40.3%, income declaration: 46.7%, and compulsory voting: 47.4%. Again the convergence between countries was highly significant ($\underline{W} = .80, \chi^2(7) = 28.08, p < .001$).

Individual deeds unacceptable. Unacceptability of individual deeds was also assessed in a highly convergent way across countries ($\underline{W} = .82, \chi^2(10) = 40.87, p < .001$), with following proportions of participants considering unacceptable not declaring a contagious illness: 77.0%, concealing one's religion: 74.3%, giving in to blackmail: 70.1%, cheating in order to get out of military service: 59.7%, hiding an escaped convict: 58.4%, bribery for obtaining an official certificate: 54.7%, assisting a terminally ill person to end life: 26.7%, denouncing a culprit: 24.2%, breach of promise: 23.7%, stealing to feed someone: 20.4%, and lying to protect someone: 14.5%.

Fatalism. Agreement with fatalistic statements converged also across national boundaries ($\underline{W} = .84, \chi^2(7) = 29.42, p < .001$). Such agreements were respectively, for the statements beginning with "No matter what we do, there will always be..." the rich and the poor: 93.1%, good and bad people: 92.2%, nations superior to others: 86.6%, people with or without a sense of honor: 85.8%, nations who do not respect human rights: 76.5%, born leaders: 74.0, whereas respectively 68.0% and 65.9% of

respondents agreed with the assertions “No single country can fully respect human rights” and “War will always exist”.

The findings presented in this section support the hypothesis that opinions about HR violations and beliefs about related topics are organized in a convergent way across the five national contexts. More precisely, opinions and beliefs on these issues are organized into a highly similar hierarchy in each country. These results lend further support to the idea that social representations involve shared references to a common meaning system by people belonging to various national or cultural contexts.

Cross-National Convergences in the Structure of Variations

The existence of a common understanding of HR violations does not necessarily mean that all individuals hold the same opinions or attitudes. Strong variations usually characterize opinions on topics such as HR violations. Clémence et al. (1994) distinguished several principles organizing variations in social positioning in this domain. Here, our goal was to investigate the cross-national convergences of these principles. In other words, we compared the structure of the variations across national contexts. In order to do so, we used a technique frequently applied in cross-cultural research to compare factorial structures assessed in various national or cultural groups (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997; see also McCrae, Zonderman, Costa, Bond, & Paumonen, 1996; Paumonen, Jackson, Trzebinski, & Forsterling, 1992).

The basic principle of the technique is to carry out a principal components analysis (PCA) for each national context separately, and then to assess the level of

factorial agreement across nations. Given that the spatial orientation of factors in PCA is arbitrary, a target rotation of the matrixes of loadings should be applied prior to evaluating cross-national convergences. Thus, a common matrix was derived from a PCA of the responses of all participants to the 20 situations (after the data were standardized per national sample; see Leung & Bond, 1989). Five factors with eigenvalue greater than 1 were retained; they explained 50.2% of the total variance. Factor loadings after VARIMAX rotation are presented in Table 3. Factor 1 was structured by violations of liberties and equality of rights. A principle of assistance and protection underlain factor 2. Factor 3 dealt with issues regarding family members and spouses in particular. Factor 4 was defined by mainly two situations excluded from the realm of HR: inequalities of income and the confinement of contagiously ill people, and also by the expulsion, without hearing, of a refugee suspected of murder. Finally, measures against minorities or deviants structured factor 5.

The matrix of factor loadings obtained for each country was rotated toward the common matrix. Then, factorial agreement was assessed using Tucker's phi, a widely applied coefficient of concordance. For each factor, the coefficient of congruence between a specific national sample and the common solution is given in Table 4. The means of these coefficients ranged from .84 to .94. Given that our goal was to compare the factorial structures of an instrument that had not been used in previous research (instead of comparing the factorial structures of a well-validated personality test for example), these values should be considered as pointing out strong similarities. In particular, the similarity of factor 1 across national contexts was very high. Of course,

some coefficients were lower than .85; thus there seemed to be non-negligible dissimilarities. In particular, factor 5 did not emerge clearly for the Swiss sample, and the coefficient of concordance for factor 3 was relatively low for Swiss and Italian respondents. However, the results suggest that variations in opinions about HR violations were structured according to a fairly similar structure across national contexts.

Contrasting Definitions of Human Rights Violations: A Typology of Respondents

The next goal of our analyses was to investigate to what extent distinct definitions of HR violations could be identified. To obtain a typology of respondents based on their conception of HR violations, we ran a cluster analysis (procedure QUICK CLUSTER). This method extracts groups of individuals according to the similarity of their responses. We retained a solution in three clusters. The first cluster was composed of 127 participants, the second cluster included 634 individuals, and the third cluster consisted of 365 participants. Because of missing data, 113 participants were not included in this analysis. The means for the 20 situations as a function of cluster membership are mentioned in Table 2. For each situation, the ANOVA was significant at $p < .001$.

The ranking of the 20 situations for the two main clusters (clusters 2 & 3) clearly overlapped the ranking found for the total population. These two clusters could be differentiated mainly on situations related to family affairs. Obliging children to attend mass or to abandon their studies, parental child-beating, preventing one's spouse (wife or husband) from going out alone were less clearly perceived as

violations of HR by respondents classified in cluster 3. It was also the case for the obligation for women to veil their faces and the fact to prevent a Black person (or a gypsy family for the Romanian sample) from renting a flat. Thus, individuals of cluster 3 shared a restrictive definition of HR, whereas those more numerous (56.3% of respondents) who were in cluster 2 stuck to a broader definition of these rights.

On the other hand, responses given by members of cluster 1 were clearly atypical. All the situations that could be related to official definitions of HR had relatively low means (for example, imprisonment without lawyer's defense, obliging children to work in factories, preventing someone from renting a flat), whereas situations which were not explicitly covered by these definitions received relatively high means (for example, prohibiting smoking in a meeting, forcibly confining someone in hospital, inequalities of salaries). This was clearly a minority position (11.3% of respondents) in every aspects opposed to the position characterizing the two other clusters. To back up these observations, we looked at Spearman rank correlation coefficients between the rankings of the 20 situations obtained for the three clusters. The rankings of clusters 2 and 3 were positively correlated with each other ($r_s = .76$, $p < .001$), but the ranking of cluster 1 was negatively correlated with the rankings of clusters 2 ($r_s = -.75$, $p < .001$) and 3 ($r_s = -.52$, $p < .05$). The ranking of cluster 1 was also negatively correlated with the ranking found for the total population ($r_s = -.67$, $p < .002$).

Anchoring in Related Belief Systems

How were variations in social positioning on HR violations linked with positioning on issues concerning the relationships between individuals and institutions, and with attitudes of fatalism? A straightforward method for investigating the organizing principles of differences in social positioning in these realms was to compute five additive scores for each individual (see also, Clémence et al., 1995): the number of governmental actions considered unacceptable, the number of queries made by the government and business firms considered to be unfair, the number of official regulations interpreted as infringements of individual freedom, the number of individual actions reported as unacceptable, and the number of agreements with fatalistic assertions. These anchoring variables were used as independent variables in a discriminant function analysis with the three clusters as dependent variables. The two functions were statistically significant. Function 1 accounted for 66.7% of the variance (Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.93$, $\chi^2(10) = 80.56$, $p < .001$), while function 2 accounted for 33.3% of the variance (Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.98$, $\chi^2(4) = 27.06$, $p < .001$). Table 5 shows the correlation of each anchoring variable on both functions. On function 1, the rejection of social regulations was opposed to the agreement with fatalistic assertions. Function 2 was defined by a strong condemnation of governmental infringements of public liberties and other rights, a rejection of inquiries in private life, and by a high tolerance for various more or less questionable individual deeds. Table 6 shows the means of the three clusters on the two discriminant functions (centroids): function 1 clearly

differentiated clusters 1 and 3, whereas function 2 differentiated mainly clusters 2 and 1.

Thus, the extended definition of HR (cluster 2) was anchored in a strong condemnation of government infringements or governmental and managerial inquiries in private life, but at the same time a high tolerance for questionable individual actions (function 2). Individuals adhering to a restricted definition of HR (cluster 3) cultivated a fatalistic conception of social reality, they approved various social regulations, and they expressed some tolerance regarding governmental interference (function 1). One can identify clearly the origins of a rather restricted representation of HR: acceptance of social regulations and a large power given to the government in the context of a rather fatalistic conception of social relations. The atypical definition of HR (cluster 1) was strongly anchored either in a firm rejection of various social regulations (function 1) or in a strong condemnation of questionable individual deeds linked with a high tolerance for governmental interference (function 2). In other words, this conception focused on individual freedom, and at the same time coexisted with tolerance for governmental violations of public liberties.

We also studied the relationships between the typology and two other social positioning variables. The first one dealt with the attribution of responsibility for the enforcement of HR and the second one concerned value priorities. These links were examined using chi-square tests (see Table 7). Opinions about whose affair it is to have HR respected ($\chi^2(6, N = 1091) = 22.84, p < .002$) were linked with membership in the three clusters. Overall, a majority of participants considered that HR should be

defended by everyone (64.3%), rather than by international organizations such as the United Nations Organization (15.5%), the government (13.0%) or associations such as Amnesty International (7.2%). However, respondents who felt that HR respect is everybody's concern or the concern of associations such as Amnesty International more often adhered to an extended definition of these rights, whereas participants who relied rather on the government or on international organizations were more likely to adopt a restrictive definition of HR.

In a similar way, fundamental value choices were linked with HR definitions ($\chi^2(4, N = 1111) = 27.32, p < .001$). A majority of participants yearned for more equality (61.6%) rather than more freedom (21.6%) or more solidarity (16.8%) for everyone, but participants favoring equality were more likely to adopt an extended definition of HR (cluster 2), whereas participants favoring solidarity were more likely to limit HR to public matters (cluster 3) and to avoid atypical definitions. Participants giving priority to freedom were more likely to adopt an atypical definition rejecting institutional definitions of HR violations (cluster 1). This finding lends further support to the idea that social representations of HR are anchored in value priorities (Spini & Doise, 1998).

Anchoring in Sociological Contexts

The last step of our analyses was to study the anchoring of the typology in groups defined by national context, gender, and age. As before, these links were studied using chi-square tests (see Table 7). The three clusters were not equally

distributed in each national context ($\chi^2(8, N = 1126) = 188.08, p < .001$). The extended definition of HR was over-represented in the Costa Rican and Swiss samples; while the restrictive definition was over-represented in the Romanian sample, and the atypical definition was so in the French sample. However, as many differences in sampling of respondents occurred across nations, no generalizations can be drawn from the observed links.

We found significant gender differences ($\chi^2(2, N = 1118) = 16.43, p < .001$): the extended definition of human rights was under-represented among male participants (51.1%) in contrast to female participants (59.7%), whereas the atypical definition was more likely to be found among male (15.7%) than female respondents (8.4%). This finding is consistent with the fact that men (28.5%) gave a higher priority to freedom than women (16.9%) ($\chi^2(2, N = 1209) = 26.24, p < .001$). Indeed, freedom corresponds to a value choice linked more often to a restricted definition of HR violations (see above).

We also found significant age differences ($\chi^2(2, N = 1123) = 11.20, p < .005$). The extended definition of human rights was under-represented among younger participants (51.1%) in contrast to older participants (60.8%), whereas atypical and restricted definitions characterized younger respondents. In line with the findings of a study of developmental effects in the social representations of HR (Doise, Staerklé, Clémence, & Savory, 1998), progress in socialization gives rise to more institutionalized and extended definitions of HR violations, whereas more idiosyncratic and restricted definitions become less frequent with such progress.

Discussion

Results reported in this paper demonstrate that strong cross-national convergences characterize social representations of HR violations. Indeed, members of different national contexts organize their opinions about HR issues along very similar lines. For example, concrete situations are ranked from the clearest HR violation to the most ambiguous in a fairly consistent way across nations. This supports the idea that social representations of HR involve shared meaning systems. However, such commonality does not imply that all individuals hold similar positions. An important contribution of this paper is to provide evidence for the idea that variations in positioning are organized according to a similar structure in each national context. Thus, we highlight cross-national convergences at two distinct levels: we point out that there are some common grounds between nations, but at the same time that variations in positioning within national contexts are also characterized by strong convergences.

Furthermore, results presented in this report indicate that contrasting definitions of HR violations coexist. Although most respondents adhere to an extended definition of HR violations, there is also a large group of participants who hesitate to include the private sphere or the family domain in their definition of HR. A third group has clearly an atypical definition of HR. For individuals classified in this minority group, situations not related to official definitions of HR are considered as violations, whereas situations usually unambiguously categorized among HR violations are not.

Variations in social positioning concerning HR violations are clearly anchored in related belief systems about social reality. Stronger rejection of governmental violations of public freedoms and refusal of institutional infringements of privacy linked with some tolerance for questionable individual deeds often lead to an extended definition of HR violations. A personal commitment to the defense of HR and a strong attachment to equality also favor such a definition. The restricted definition of HR is rooted in a fatalistic conception of social reality, approval of social regulations, and a more lenient attitude toward governmental power abuses. Participants adopting this restricted conception are also more likely to rely on the government or intergovernmental organizations to have HR respected. As far as the atypical definition of human rights is concerned, it is strongly anchored in either a clear rejection of social regulations or in a condemnation of more or less immoral individual actions linked with a high tolerance for government interference.

These anchoring patterns confirm that beliefs about relationships between individuals and institutions play an important role in shaping social representations. The frontiers drawn between private and public matters underlie attitudes toward individuals and governmental actions, approval or rejection of social regulations, opinions concerning the defense of HR, and value priorities.

Finally, positioning regarding the definition of HR violations is also anchored in sociological contexts. The three conceptions extracted are not equally distributed among groups defined by country, gender, and age. Members of the same group share specific experiences that modulate their positioning in HR issues. In accordance with

results of a previous research (Doise et al., 1998), restricted and atypical definitions of HR are less frequent among older participants, progress in socialization giving rise to more extended definitions of HR violations.

Our approach of social representations emphasizes the idea that groups or individuals can at the same time share a common meaning system and position themselves differently within this common framework. Human rights are defined at a general and abstract level in the Universal Declaration, which has been largely disseminated into the public. Official definitions of HR provide a common ground to individuals of different national origins or cultural backgrounds. However, as official definitions of HR are transformed into lay theories and are anchored in other symbolic systems, oppositions between groups or individuals are emerging. In this particular study, we demonstrate that appraisals of concrete and specific situations involving HR issues are based on a common reference system, but that strong divergences in social positioning are also coming into play.

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