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Statistical evidence on social representations of teachers in Argentina, Brazil and Portugal

Luís Pardal^{a*}, Diana Albuquerque^b, Madalena Lopes^b, Maria Eugénia Ferrão^b

^a*CIDTFF – University of Aveiro, Campus Universitário de Santiago, 3810-193 Aveiro, Portugal*

^b*University of Beira Interior, Rua Marquês d'Ávila e Bolama, 6200-001 Covilhã, Portugal*

Abstract

This paper is focused on the discussion of the social representation of a teacher as a psychologist and its impact on learning strategies. Quantitative methods were applied to data collected in a survey conducted in Argentina, Brazil and Portugal in 2006/2007. The sample consists of 2789 students doing their teaching studies in higher education institutions. The results obtained suggest there is a proximity teacher-psychologist, and also that those who assume the proximity to psychologists are more prone to believe in the advantages of getting more involved with students as a learning strategy.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Teacher-Psychologist association: a relevant social representation

Studies carried out in various contexts (e.g. Pardal, Gonçalves, Martins, Neto-Mendes & Pedro, 2011; Sousa, Pardal, & Villas Boas, 2009), namely in countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Portugal, have made it make clear that there is a social representation of the teaching profession, among students in higher education/future teachers, revealing the existence of a "socially elaborate and shared knowledge" within a group (Jodelet, 2005, p.366) regarding that job, building a teacher's identity associated to the specificity of his/her work.

In spite of the spatial diversity of the studied group, this is recognized as a socially relevant object, and with the suitable "social weight" for justifying the existence of a representation (Sá, 1998, p.50). Representations expressed by surveyed people on the understanding of the teaching profession, what in Wagner's opinion, sets up a key criterion of their characterization, i.e. the existence of "knowledge elements pertaining to all potential co-actors" (Wagner, 2000, p.19). These studies make it possible to understand that, despite the diversity of contexts, the traits emphasized in the central core of the representation and the system that provides it with stability, are the same: a teacher association to a professional education and a human relation component. If it is true that the first association seems to be one that gives more consistency to the traditional idea of a teacher, it is the second - the teacher association to the human relation component in the performance of his/her duties - the one that draws more attention to itself. Furthermore, when faced with the question of the proximity of other professions to the teacher profession,

* Luís Pardal. Tel.: +351-234-370-200
E-mail address: pardal@ua.pt

students/future teachers refer to the psychologist without hesitation. What are the meaning and other features of the teacher-psychologist representation?

1.2. What is the representation of a teacher associated to a psychologist?

The school functions, with an increasingly broad curriculum, and the complexity of the problems that have accompanied the massification and the consequent cultural and social heterogeneity (indiscipline, violence, conflicts, new contemporary social problems within the school environment) may not be a complete answer to the question raised but, they are certainly in the midst of a reply: the individuals see themselves as professionals who play roles that go beyond the traditional limits of the teaching contents, with particular emphasis on their as professional involved in human and affective relations within the school environment. However the emphasis on such traits associated to the teaching profession has certainly got other explanations. Among them, the type of training received at universities and in various training schools cannot be overlooked. Franco (2002) presented data of a survey in which 70% of the surveyed students highlighted the aspects they enjoyed most in teachers, which were those linked to emotional-affective conditions. They do not hesitate to associate that image to the academic education of constructivist teachers, in which theoretical and methodological assumptions that support such approaches are not always understood and analyzed.

This is how the researcher expresses herself: under this label (constructivism) authors who, despite the same epistemology, posit theories that are very different from each other. However, teachers do not always have the opportunity to understand and develop the theoretical and methodological assumptions that support such approaches. Hence, what is observed is a pasteurization of theories, being "constructivist" ends up being "a word of order", another "fad", and a label without its real meaning. As a result, many misconceptions have arisen (Franco, 2002; pp.201-202). Nevertheless, the social representation of Teacher-Psychologist may result of such "pasteurization of theories".

1.3. Teacher-Psychologist: meaning and characterization of a representation

Any representation "is always an object representation" (Jodelet, 2005; p.371). Hence, in the representation process, the representation and its object is considered inseparable. When the surveyed students suggest there is proximity between the profession of a teacher and a psychologist, being themselves teachers within the training process in an explicit socialization process for this purpose, they do not represent their future profession as if they were outside, separate from the object they represent; subject and object appear as something inseparable, both maintaining their dynamics: "the object is in an active, unstable context since it is partially designed by an individual or a community while an extension of their behaviour" (Moscovici, 1976, p.46). If we reflect on the life and the socialization process to which teachers have been submitted – a long pre-university cycle, associated to a specific University teacher training - future teachers are objectively preparing themselves for professional practice. Therefore, it is coherent to state that the representation they make about their future profession represents, in the cognitive and symbolic plans, an action preparation. Thus, the social representation they make of their profession, imagined close to the one of the psychologist constitutes a "behavioural guide" represented as psychologist, enabling its sense and "remodelling and rebuilding the elements of the environment where the behaviour should take place" (Moscovici, 1976; p.47). This means approaching the school environment from a psychologist point of view. Additionally, in a representation of subject and object, "the action is part of a representation and not its consequence" (Wagner, 2000; p.19). The teacher who "lives" within the students of our sample emerges in these with a didactic-pedagogical model, perceiving a speech that operated in groups of people. They are "actual groups thanks to their internal relations" (Harré, 2007; p.149) that consolidate communication inside them. In this regard, remember that "in most cases, the discursive productions allow access to the representations" (Abric, 2008; p.15), making it possible to understand, in the case of this research, the importance of the training received at college, a vehicle of interest to explain the nature of the speech production. Those representations exert two key functions when carrying out the surveyor's profession plan: guidance and justification. In its role as advisor, they would guide

"the behaviours and practices". Moreover, making it possible to "a posteriori justify the positions and behaviours" when intervening and evaluating the actions, "thus allowing the actors to explain and justify their conduct in a given situation or in relation to their peers" (p.16-17).

1.4. Aims of the study

The paper has two main aims. The first is to confirm the existence of a social Teacher-Psychologist representation in three ibero-American countries. The second aim is to show that this representation is related to another, behavioural nature, based on the belief that a relationship among teacher and student is fundamental in overcoming learning difficulties.

To this end, statistical data analyses based on the contingency tables and the hypothesis test for the independence between the teacher social representation and his/her belief in the successful learning strategy, were applied to the data collected on a sample of 2789 individuals who attended institutions of higher education in Brazil, Argentina and Portugal at the time of collecting the data, in the scope of the study described by Pardal et al. (2011).

2. Methods and results

2.1. Definition and demographic characterization of the sample

The target population consists of higher education students who attended a training course for teachers of pedagogy/elementary school teachers or teachers taking their degree in education, in Argentina, Brazil and Portugal in 2006/2007. The sample is not probabilistic (not at random) and consists of 2,789 individuals. Data collection was performed by application of questionnaires presented in Pardal (2011, pp.122-125). The empirical distributions (valid cases) by gender and marital status show that the majority of individuals are female (80%) and single (55%). The frequency distribution by age range is as follows: 29% from 17 to 19 years of age, 33% from 20 to 23 years of age, 21% from 24 to 30 years of age, 17% from 31 to more years of age. Additionally, 3.9% of those surveyed answered that they would finish the course within one year, 17.5% in two years, 42% after three years and 36.6% within four years.

Primary variables were transformed into binary variables, defined as follows:

- Proximity of the teaching profession to the one of a psychologist ($X = 1$: proximity to the psychologist profession; $X = 0$: proximity to another profession),
- Relationship between teachers and students in order to overcome learning difficulties ($Y = 1$: Teachers engage with students in order to overcome the difficulties; $Y = 0$: Reorganization of the teaching practice and teachers regaining their role as educators in order to overcome learning difficulties).

2.2. Empirical distribution of a social representation: teacher as a psychologist

Table 1 is a frequency table on the variable that represents proximity to the teaching profession. It can be noted that 55.9% of students/future teachers choose the profession of a psychologist and only 7.5% of a priest/pastor. Everything indicates that the teacher representation as a priest/pastor is residual among the members of the sample. The psychologist profession is the one represented closer to the future profession of elementary, high school/junior school and kindergartner teachers. This is the opinion of 55.9% of students.

2.3. Contingency table for behavioural guide

Table 2 is a contingency table for the variables of teachers' social representation as a psychologist (X) and the belief in the successful learning strategy (Y). It may be observed that the odds ratio, obtained by the conditional probabilities, is 1.2, suggesting that the probability of the individuals' belief in the relationship between teachers and

students will help overcome learning difficulties, it increases in the group with social representation Teacher-Psychologist.

Table 1. Professional Proximity Frequency

Professional proximity	Absolute Frequency (all cases)	Relative Frequency, % (all cases)	Relative Frequency, % (valid cases)
Doctor	280	10.0	10.5
Priest/Pastor	200	7.2	7.5
Lawyer	45	1.6	1.7
Bricklayer	258	9.3	9.7
Engineer	130	4.7	4.9
Psychologist	1485	53.2	55.9
Another Profession	258	9.3	9.7
Subtotal	2656	95.2	100.0
Missing Data	133	4.8	
Total	2789	100.0	

Table 2. Table of Contingency

		Teacher as a Psychologist (X)		Total
		No (X=0)	Yes(X=1)	
Teacher closer to students (Y)	No (Y=0)	702	829	1531
	Yes (Y=1)	453	635	1088
Total		1155	1464	2619

$P(Y=0|X=0) = \frac{702}{1155} = 0.61$, $P(Y=1|X=0) = \frac{453}{1155} = 0.39$, $P(Y=0|X=1) = \frac{829}{1464} = 0.57$, $P(Y=1|X=1) = \frac{635}{1464} = 0.43$
 Odds ratio = $\frac{P(Y=0|X=0) \cdot P(Y=1|X=1)}{P(Y=1|X=0) \cdot P(Y=0|X=1)} = \frac{0.61 \cdot 0.43}{0.39 \cdot 0.57} = 1.18$

2.4. Chi-square hypotheses test for the independence between variables

The chi-square statistics for the hypotheses test of statistical independence between variables are presented in table 3.

Table 3. Chi-square statistics

	Value	df	Asymp.Sig.
Pearson Chi-Square	4.587	1	0.032
Likelihood Ratio	4.593	1	0.032
N of Valid Cases	2619		

At level of significance of 5% the null hypothesis is rejected since $\chi^2=4.587$, p-value=0.032, $\chi^2_{(\alpha=0.05;df=1)}=3.84$. Thus, there is statistical evidence that variables Y and X are not statistically independent at the level of significance of 5%.

3. Discussion

The students, future teachers, who have the social representation Teacher-Psychologist are more likely to believe in the benefits of this relationship to overcome learning difficulties. Such representation, captured as "a symbolic activity, and in particular a way of speech" (Harré, 2007; p.150), it is particularly intense among those approaching the teaching profession to the one of a psychologist, being the odd ratio equal to 1.2. What is this representation due to? First of all, the significant percentage of students who have this representation referred both the importance that this may have on future professional practices of the surveyed students, and also as an instrument of reflection on teacher training policies.

However, it should be added that a more consistent response could only be given if respondents based their justification on their own representation. The instruments used for data collection were not, however, built with this intention. Nevertheless, in spite of not preventing a conjecture, it imposes limits on it. Another limitation to the inferential generalization of results lies on the non-probability sampling design.

The results presented encourage the formulation of some issues with great and current academic interest and invite us to some reflections under a didactic-pedagogical scope, whose usefulness seems remarkable both in terms of teaching and learning, and the teacher training level. The traditional role of the teacher, i.e. its association with a commitment to teach and knowledge transference, remains. It seems undeniable, though, that there is a growing trend regarding components of the teaching profession, which may, over time, and following the current dynamics, overlook what has been essential in school: emphasise the cognitive aspects. Therefore, the old teacher would be replaced by a highly heterogeneous professional, perhaps more concerned with the emotional well-being of his/her students than with learning. Evidence in this study, according to which future teachers find it beneficial to engage more with students in order to overcome learning difficulties, is not statistically independent of teachers finding their profession close to the psychologist's profession.

Consequently, there are other issues in the didactic-pedagogical plan such as: what is best for learning? A teacher associated to his/her historic commitment or a teacher/psychologist in the sense that is represented in this study? Whatever the answer may be, it requires a theoretical and practical framework.

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