

THE MENTALLY DEFICIENT ADULT ACCORDING TO SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF TEACHERS OF A SPECIAL SCHOOL IN CUIABÁ – MATO GROSSO

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1. Introduction

We have lately been faced with the increase in human beings' life expectancy, including that of people with deficiencies, the mentally deficient among them. Such a fact leads us to reflect on the importance of specialized educational services offered to those people, as a way of providing them with the development of their potentialities and prepare them for adult life. If we take it into account that reaching adult life means living independently of parents, being able to keep and maintain responsibilities, we can assume that mentally deficient adults will not always manage to respond adequately to these conditions. However, within these adults' possibilities they will be able to develop as long as they are recognized and valued and that they are offered experiences that are compatible with their chronological age, and opportunities to affirm themselves as subjects.

Although special education is a possible path for such, once its objective is to widen the educational opportunities of individuals with deficiencies, Bueno (1977) points out to the fact that it is not performing its real function. It has served, over the years, the purpose of indefinitely perpetrating the schooling process of its users, reinforcing the segregation process of the same and legitimating their condition of social marginality.

According to Coelho and Sant'Anna (1988), Rojas (1996) special schools not always have a clear and objective definition of their programs or of their continuation or termination criteria. This has favoured the accumulation of deficient adults in these educational spaces that end up directing their actions within a patronizing view, treating these students as eternal children in need of protection.

Certainly, the existing problems that hinder the preparation of carriers of deficiencies for adult life are neither concentrated only on the lack of definite proposals for their education, nor on the inherent difficulties of these adults. The belief that people have

about deficiency and the manner in which they face the mentally deficient adult are factors that can also be considered.

The research conducted aims at finding out what the elements that constitute the social representations (SR) about the mentally deficient adult are; identifying the ways in which these representations are structured and organized. The theoretical framework adopted is that proposed by Serge Moscovici through the Theory of Social Representations (TSR), and the complementary approach of the Theory of the Central Nucleus of Representations proposed by Jean Claude Abric. According to Moscovici (1978:26) SR are a “particular modality of knowledge whose function is the elaboration of behaviour and the communication among individuals.” Built in a shared manner, in the daily interaction among people, they are made up of explanations, statements that reflect the thoughts of a group about a given object. In a complementary manner Abric (1994) sees SR not only as a set of ideas and values, but also as socio-cognitive sets that have an internal structure and organization and are made up of two subsystems that possess distinct characteristics and functions, named Central Nucleus (CN) and Peripheral System (PS).

The CN is what gives sense to a representation, working as an organizing and stabilizing element. It is considered to be the common basis of SR and what defines the homogeneity of a social group. Determined by the group’s history and linked to its collective memory, it is coherent, stable and resistant to changes. It is also considered normative and has, as a function, to guarantee the continuity and permanence of a social representation. As for the PS, it consists of the complement to the CN, and it supports the heterogeneity and the contradictions within the group. It is flexible and it makes it possible to integrate the representations into the individual’s own history and personal experiences. Due to its functional character, it allows for adaptation to concrete reality. Performing a protective role, it absorbs new information and knowledge that are likely to question the CN. By doing this, as it allows transformations to occur in its elements, it guarantees that the central elements are kept for a certain amount of time. Identifying the CN and the peripheral elements of the representations about the mentally deficient adult is one of the objectives of this study, revealing a concern for the social attitudes towards these people as well as for the social integration of the different being.

2. Method of Analysis

The group of participants of this study consisted of thirty-three teachers of a special school that offers services to mentally deficient individuals of different ages.

In the light of the theoretical framework, a plural methodological approach was chosen, as a way of facilitating a deeper understanding of the studied object as well as of offering more accuracy in the interpretative analysis. Quantitative and qualitative techniques were mixed and the data collection instruments used were: a) observation of the school routine, b) employment of free association techniques, c) successive hierarchical selections (SHS), and e) semi structured interviews.

The observation conducted in the natural environment aimed at obtaining an understanding of the reality experienced by teachers together with the adult deficient students, and the access to the socio-cultural practices of the group. The data recorded in a field diary made it possible to describe the events, rituals and attitudes present, allowing for the understanding not only of the group routine but also of the actual SR.

Through free association the elements present within the content of SR were identified. The technique consisted of presenting the subjects with an inducing phrase, in this case “mentally deficient adult”, with a request for them to evoke words that this phrase made them remember. All the items generated by this technique were tabulated and analysed firstly according to frequency, with the purpose of using them in the employment of the instrument called Successive Hierarchical Selections (SHS). According to Abric, the SHS allow for the classification of attributes collected through free association, taking their order of importance for each individual into account, turning explicit elements that are likely to form the peripheral system of representations. In this manner, through this technique, it was possible to find out what the internal organization and structure of representations is. Taking the dictionary of words produced initially by free association as a reference, a set of thirty-two items was extracted that are characteristic of the researched object. To form this set the criteria used was of frequency, aiming at the inclusion of both the most frequent and the least frequent items, making up what Abric calls a wide and comprehensive set of attributes. This set was presented to each of the participating subjects, with the request that they separated the items into two separate blocks of sixteen words each, one corresponding to the items that more closely related to the object studied and the other of the items that least related to it. The process was then repeated for the first block once new choices were successively made until subjects

could indicate one item only, that they considered the most accurate description of the mentally deficient adult. Next, each subject justified their choice and attached a meaning to the final item by contextualizing it, since they had, until then, worked with isolated words whose meanings were unknown. The data collected through this technique provided the attributes more closely related to the mentally deficient adult, in order of importance. After this, the words obtained through free association were submitted to another kind of analysis, occasion in which the double criteria of frequency and order was used. The aim of this analysis was to determine which elements make part of the CN and of the peripheral system of representations and the software used was EVOC (Ensemble de programmes permettant l'analyse des évocations, by Pierre Vergès . EVOC provided a dictionary in which the attributes are distributed in alphabetical order and followed by the simple frequency of occurrence of each one of them, the inversely weighted average of occurrence of each attribute according to the order of evocation and the average of mean weighted orders of the set of words, indicating their centrality. From there it became possible to build a four-subdivision table where the elements that make up the SR could be distributed according to their degree of centrality, and, thus, offer a visual map of the attributes within the CN and the peripheral system of representations.

Taking the elements from the table and the dictionary of words into account, the data analysis was complemented further by the separation of the words obtained through free association into categories. Such a process followed the orientation of Vergès (1992) in Abric (1994:67) who proposes verifying if the most frequent words allow for the formation of a set of categories organized around the terms, thus confirming the evidences of their organizing role in the representation. Therefore, all the words were grouped according to similar meaning or for attracting other complementary terms. The categories elaborated a posteriori were also submitted to the analysis through EVOC, which offered informative reports of the number of occurrences of each word that composes the category, respective percentages, frequency of each word, the average and the distribution of the number of words according to the order of evocation. This data made it possible to identify the strong categories composed of high frequency words and promptly evoked and the weak categories formed by low frequency words and words evoked in the last positions.

For the integration and contextualization of the data the content of the interviews conducted with fourteen teachers of mentally deficient adults was used. These teachers were chosen according to how much they interacted daily with the students and how close they were to the adult students in order to guarantee that they would be able to offer important information about the students' routine. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and used in this study as a complementary technique to the previous ones. They provided relevant information for the contextualization of attributes appearing in the table organized in categories and allowed for the identification of the links between SR built by the group of teachers and the factors that determined them.

3. Results

Through free association a dictionary was obtained, composed of two hundred and fifty-seven words, among which a hundred and fourteen different words can be found. These consisted of attributes that are characteristic of the mentally deficient adult and translated the elements that make part of the content of SR about the object in question. Taking a block of thirty-two attributes that were selected according to the criteria mentioned earlier as reference, the hierarchical organization of the items through the various stages of choice was carried out. The data was tabulated by the criteria of simple and relative frequency.

Through the process of hierarchical organization it was observed that eighteen attributes remained as finalists, corresponding to 56.25% of the total initially presented to the teachers.

The elements considered as the most important of the social representation and characteristic of the mentally deficient adult identified by this technique were sexuality and opportunity which had frequency four, affection and prejudice with frequency three, followed by love, support, difference, integration and professional formation with frequency two. Nine other attributes were also indicated, showing frequency: need of affection, capacity, personal care, dependence, discrimination, independence, instability, immaturity and limitation.

The results obtained from hierarchical selections showed a certain dispersion of the attributes since the mentally deficient adult's characteristics were pulverized in a large amount of items. This fact pointed out some heterogeneity in the group of teachers' way of thinking, looking at and conceiving the representation object.

The words collected through free association were also submitted to analysis by the software EVOC, which provided for the making of a table with four subdivisions by means of a frequency criteria and evocation order.

For the distribution of a mentally deficient adult's most characteristic attributes, items that were evoked for at least five times were considered, and they can be seen in the next table.

Table 1 - Distribution of the mentally deficient adult's distinguishing attributes

FREQUENCY	MEAN ORDER OF EVOCATION	
	FEWER THAN 4.4	MORE THAN 4.4
ABOVE 8	12 NEED OF AFFECTION 09 DEPENDENCE 15 SEXUALITY	14 AGGRESSIVENESS
FROM 5 TO 8	08 AFFECTION 06 IMMATURITY 08 INDEPENDENCE 07 LIMITATION 05 OPPORTUNITY 05 REJECTION	05 DISCRIMINATION 07 INFANTILITY

It was found out that on the upper left quarter of the four-subdivision table three attributes were grouped: sexuality, need of affection and dependence, which showed high frequency and were promptly evoked. These elements are therefore considered the most likely to constitute the CN of SR about the mentally deficient adult and account for the most characteristic items of the object studied, being essential to the formation and organization of SR.

On the lower right quarter the items infantility and discrimination, which showed low frequency and appeared evoked in the last positions were agglutinated, thus being regarded as the peripheral elements of the representations. As for the upper right quarter, it shelters one attribute only: aggressiveness, which in spite of having shown high frequency, was not promptly evoked. It was considered an intermediary element that is meaningful together with the central elements, reinforcing them. The lower left quarter stored six attributes of low frequency, though they were promptly evoked by the subjects, and were also regarded as intermediary elements in a representation. In this

case, the element affection was considered an attribute that reinforces the need of affection located in the CN, while immaturity, limitation, independence, rejection and opportunity, however, strengthen the elements situated in the peripheral system of the representations since they are somewhat contradictory attributes, but which express the real characteristics that belong to the subjects' routine.

On comparing the attributes that remained in the four-subdivision table through the analysis carried out by EVOC to the attributes that stayed until the last stage of choice of successive hierarchical selections, the existence of nine elements that were present in both kinds of analysis was observed. They were confirmed in the structure of the social representation about the mentally deficient adult, as they are located either in its CN or in its peripheral system. Such attributes are sexuality, need of affection, dependence, limitation, affection, immaturity, independence, discrimination and opportunity.

It was also verified in the analysis carried out through hierarchical selections that the attributes aggressiveness, infantility and rejection, which are characteristic of an adult with mental deficiency, were discarded in the initial stages of choice. However, through EVOC it was observed that such attributes had been evoked several times in free association, had high frequency, and should therefore be taken into account in the final analysis. Such elements were directly linked to the context and the reality experienced by the subjects researched in their relationships with the deficient adults. It was also evident that while adult's characteristic elements had not been considered, in the hierarchical selections the teachers valued elements that showed low frequency, were little evoked, but expressed an idealization of their role with the adult student, elements which did not correspond to the group's reality.

In face of such comparison, it can be noted that through EVOC all the attributes were taken into account for the analysis that is loyal to the initial evocations. Therefore, the elements present in the four-subdivision table were the ones used for the continuation of the work.

Starting from the attributes present on the quarters and in the dictionary of words, ten categories were produced, and named after the items whose frequency was the highest. They are: need of affection, dependence, sexuality, aggressiveness, infantility, limitation, disease, abandonment, rejection and opportunity. All the similar terms and

meanings alike were grouped together and afterwards submitted to analysis through EVOC.

The double criteria of frequency combined with the weighted average by evocation order was adopted, thus showing the categories regarded as strong, intermediary and weak. Taking the elements present in the four-subdivision table and the categories formed into consideration, a qualitative discussion of the attributes was then developed, and for that the teachers' speech obtained from the semantic contextualization carried out together with the application of successive hierarchical selections and the interviews.

Need of affection was a category that comprised attributes such as need, love, care, friendship and affection, words which related to lack or insufficiency of affection concerning the adult with a mental deficiency, pointing out to their need to receive mainly love and care in order to establish healthy social relationships. According to the teachers, adults do not receive affection on the part of their family members, thus the institution becomes responsible for the catering for such needs and minimizing the difficulties presented.

Dependence revealed the condition in which the adult-carriers of deficiency are, and their lack of preparation to face daily situations since they must be assisted, accompanied and supervised while performing their activities. It also showed the deficient adults' need of acquiring not only their personal, but also their social independence so that they can be accepted and integrated to society.

Sexuality contained a set of elements connected with the adult students' sex life, including attributes related to malice, dating and masturbation. Such attributes constituted the distinguishing features of adults who, according to the teachers, show exhibitionistic behaviours that are regarded as inadequate, behaviours that serve to identify a person who has a sharpened or emerged sexuality, the manifestation of which causes uneasiness and embarrassment.

On the other hand, infantility expressed the childish way of being of the adult student, housing words such as innocence, immaturity and inadequacy. A different adult from the normal adults was pointed out whom, due to a mis-match between their biological and cognitive development is often seen and treated as a child.

The category aggressiveness gathered elements such as agitation, rebellion and indiscipline, which represent an unstable and hostile behaviour of an adult who is considered inadequate. Such characteristics constitute a great difficulty faced by the teachers on a daily basis with the students since they cause fear.

As for the category limitation, it lodged attributes that related to difficulties inherent to the development of a person with mental deficiency. It not only revealed the intellectual deficiency, but also the slow rhythm of learning, difficulties in communication, perception, concentration and memorization, thus overestimating the individual's intrinsic limitations. The teachers pointed out that teaching deficient adults to read and write is unfeasible, showing that the activities offered to them do not correspond to their chronological age and do not take the aspects which take the aspects that provide for a cognitive and social development into account.

The category disease listed attributes that were linked to an adult who is mistaken for someone mentally ill, having some type of disorder or lesion that justifies medical assistance and pharmacological control. To the teachers, the student regarded as mentally ill behaves like a child who depends on those around him and must be constantly accompanied by them.

Abandonment collected elements that indicate the adults are mostly abandoned by their family members since many of them do not have either parents or live in an institution. The teachers made it quite clear that due to this fact, deficient adults are treated with neglect, poorly cared for, and do not always show a healthy hygienic aspect. Therefore, the institution also ends up looking after their personal appearance.

Rejection was a category that reflected the social attitudes expressed towards a person with mental deficiency, underlining the discrimination and prejudice that exist today. According to the teachers, such attitudes arise from the fact that the deficient do not fit the normal standards pre-established by society, thus contributing to the isolation, detraction and exclusion of the individual regarded as different. Another reason pointed out as triggering rejection was probably people's lack of knowledge about mental deficiency.

As for the category named opportunity, the attributes that expressed the idealization by the teachers of the deficient adult were grouped, reflecting the goals that must be achieved by them with regard to professional education, placement in the job market

and social integration. To the teachers, the adults must be encouraged to develop their potentialities and regarded as people deserving to be given opportunities. The elements contained in this category expressed the established, politically correct discourse adopted by the members of the educational unit.

4. Conclusion

In the light of the theoretical reference chosen to conduct this paper and of the methodological procedures adopted for collecting, analyzing and interpreting the data it was possible to understand the reality experienced by the group of teachers with the deficient adult student, and to identify not only its most significant features but also to provide the explanations needed to understand them.

The results showed that the SR around the mentally deficient adult are framed and organized around a CN that consists of three elements: need of affection, dependence and sexuality, attributes which give meaning to the whole of the representation and reveal the group's homogeneous, strict and deep-rooted views on the deficient adult, once these distinguishing features are determiners and have existed since past periods.

As Abric emphasizes (1994), the CN of the representations must really be influenced by the group's collective memory and by the system of patterns and values that rule it, being the common part of the collectively shared representations.

While the teachers establish a close link with the students through their need of affection and dependence, it is through the disclosure of their sexuality that the same students show their adult condition. The sexuality regarded as emerging, exacerbated and uncontrollable, formed by a biological indicator, is the attribute that gives meaning and points out to the differentiation of the mentally deficient student's mature and adult stage. Sexuality, dependence and need of affection emphasize the representation of fragile adults who do not control their impulses, and who are not prepared to cope with daily life, representation which has existed in the course of history since the deficient have been regarded in different periods of time as unproductive people, unable to deal with their frustrations and inner conflicts.

Besides the elements mentioned, there are other attributes that establish a direct connection with the CN, and play an essential role in the operation and dynamics of the representations. Named as peripheral elements by Abric (1994), they are more flexible and allow the integration of individual histories, as well as the group's daily

experiences. In this study nine elements were found in the peripheral system of the representations: aggressiveness, affection, immaturity, independence, limitation, opportunity, rejection, discrimination and infantility. Through them a diversification was revealed, reflecting the group's heterogeneous way of conceiving an adult carrier of mental deficiency, and disclosing some existing contradictions.

Aggressiveness was an element placed very close to the CN of the representations. Through aggressiveness the students impose themselves making their adult condition quite clear, which is also confirmed by the biological aspect, creating situations of fear. This attribute provided support for a popular belief, which still exists these days, that every mentally deficient person is aggressive. On the other hand, infantility and immaturity were elements that showed an adult who is naive, emotionally fragile, has an incomplete development, and therefore is not ready to accept responsibilities.

Taking these aspects into consideration, a picture of the mentally deficient regarded as an eternal child was disclosed, a representation which is still strong nowadays. Through these results it can be seen that the social representation of the mentally deficient adult leads to an adult who is different, unfinished and incomplete, and who is not prepared to analyze and apprehend reality. Such a representation proved to be archaic, supporting that of earlier periods since it underlined the disqualified aspect of a mentally deficient adult person. It accounted for the need of assistance, protection and care that are offered to these adults since they are exposed to prejudice and social rejection.

Such factors explain the segregation into the institutional environment. As contemporary society overvalues intellectual abilities, creative potential and productivity, deficient adults become a group of detracted, discredited and unproductive beings, which account for the lack of opportunity and the maintenance of the social exclusion process. Therefore, it can be stated that the SR do interfere with the interactive processes of the mentally deficient adults, making it difficult not only for them to be accepted but also integrated into society.

5. Originality of results

The research conducted contributes to adding data to the reality of the adult-carrier of mental deficiency in Brazil, where scientific work on the issue is still scarce. It indicates aspects for consideration in face of the representations that still occur, consisting of a

diagnosis of the institutional reality that can be used to trigger an analysis of its proposed programs or services.

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