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SOCIO-ECONOMIC PRECARIOUSNESS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL VULNERABILITY
comparison between the French and the Portuguese people about the hierarchization of values

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Reference to values appears to be a good indicator of the personal and social changes occurring in our post-modern society. Their analysis allows the comprehension of how individuals that live in a situation of socioeconomic and professional precariousness interpret their situation, taking their personal history and experience into consideration. It focuses on the relevance that values assume on making representations of social reality and devising guiding actions in moments of crisis and internal divide Oubrayrie-Roussel & Safont-Mottay, 2004). According to Loubaki (1998), when individuals find themselves in difficult situations, they give priority to their own systems of significations – values – that allow them to tackle the problems by selecting the aims and the possible means of action.

The dynamics of values influence people at the level of their choices, of the decision-making process, of self-evaluation, and even of their guided personal life route. It is through values that individuals assert themselves, express their sense of belonging to a specific culture, and establish the communication conditions in a historic and socially defined space.

Boudaoud & Hernen (1991) classify the various values according to the following dimensions: social, physical, religious, moral, psychological, and functional. Studying the values held by people who live in a situation of precariousness entails an approach to the economic values as well as to the values concerning health and quality of life.

METHOD

Participants

► N = 449

Table with 4 columns: Gender/Situation, Portugal (Coimbra), France (Toulouse), Total. Rows include Male, Female, Precarious situation, and Not precarious situation.

Materials

► Based on a list of 21 (personal, social, cultural, professional and other) values, 20 were selected for being the ones more closely related with the current research. And those were: help, friendship, love, well-being, dignity, money, family, happiness, hygiene, equality, freedom, pleasure, protection, quality of life, religion, health, solidarity, dreams, luck, and work. The interviewers are requested to rank these values according to their importance, from number 1 (the most important one) to number 20 (the least important one) (Tap & Vasconcelos, 2004).

Procedure

► The compilation of data was carried out in Public Health Care Centres in the central region of Portugal and in Toulouse, in France, with the co-operation of GPs, social workers, and psychologists. The users were requested to fill in the questionnaire in full. In case the participants showed difficulties seeing, reading and/or understanding, they would be assisted by the researcher, who would read the questions and/or explain their meaning to them. Participation was voluntary.

RESULTS

As regards its factorial structure, the analysis of the main components followed by rotation of the varimax type yielded three bipolar factors (each of the values being significantly correlated with some other factor): Factor 1 (Fulfilment) opposes hedonistic fulfilment (hygiene, pleasure, dreams, freedom, and quality of life) to socio-emotional fulfilment (friendship, happiness, love, dignity, and well-being) (11.68% of variation). Factor 2 (Commitment) opposes pragmatic commitment (money, work, protection) to community commitment (solidarity, equality, help) (11.65% of variation); Factor 3 (Security) opposes idealized aspiration (luck, religion) to traditional security (health, family) (9.48% of variation).

► Classification of values according to socioeconomic status

The analysis presented in the table below confirms that, in their classification, precarious and non-precarious people are in complete agreement about the importance of health, love, and family, ranking them high in their list of values. Moreover, the means obtained through these values are not significantly different between the two groups.

Table with 8 columns: Values, Precar. Situation (M), Ranking, Non-Precar. Situation (M), Ranking, Significance, Total, Ranking. Rows list 20 values from Help to Work.

✓ People in a precarious situation greatly value money, work, protection, happiness, and well-being. Hence, these people appreciate what they lack and need: money, work, protection, and well-being/happiness, that is, instrumental values in the satisfaction of concrete actions.

✓ On the other hand, non-precarious people value quality of life, freedom, pleasure, and equality, over other values, because those have a strong symbolic reference as "universal aims", synthesizing human rights (liberty and equality), and also because of their hedonistic connotation (quality of life and pleasure).

Here we observe that well-being (instrumental value) and quality of life (final value) are not systematically associated. One might have assumed that quality of life would be claimed by those whose situation positions them unfavourably in life (both economically and culturally). This questions the representations that assume the existence of an automatic oscillation between instrumental values and universal values. But, up to this moment, the precarious group have valued well-being, whereas the non-precarious one have preferred quality of life, an expression that (as a result of its abstract meaning) is differently understood and defined by people.

The differences found here, however, are relative ones. We must not forget that the two groups list values such as love, health (and others), in a very positive and similar way. They are ranked first and second among the other values.

► Classification of values according to country

As shown in the table below, the Portuguese and the French do not attribute the same importance to 17 of the 20 proposed values. The three values in agreement (the differences are negligible) regard: health (ranking third and second), solidarity (ranking 13th and 14th), and religion (ranking 19th and 20th). This last result is unexpected because of its ranking and the absence of a difference, the Portuguese generally being regarded as a more religious group.

✓ The Portuguese, rather than the French, place more stress on values such as freedom (1) and equality (8), universal values, as well as on quality of life (5), hygiene, pleasure, help, dreams, and luck. Of these eight values, five belong to the hedonistic pole of the fulfilment factor (factor 1). On the other hand, the Portuguese value help and equality, which constitute the community pole of the commitment factor (factor 2).

✓ On the other hand, the French clearly value love (1), family (3), friendship (4), happiness (5), well-being (8), dignity (9), money (11), work (7), and protection (18). It is noticeable that five of the nine more frequent values belong to the socio-emotional pole of the fulfilment factor (factor 1) correlated with family. On the contrary, the French place a greater emphasis on values such as money, work, and protection: the three values of the pragmatic pole of the commitment factor.

Table with 7 columns: Values, Portugal (M), Ranking, France (M), Ranking, Significance. Rows list 20 values from Help to Work.

✓ These differential results clearly oppose the Portuguese, more hedonistic and community-focused, to the French, who are more pragmatic and socio-emotional.

► Classification of values according to gender

As the conceptions and studies on this kind of effects go, these results are quite surprising. The differences between men and women are only represented in 3 of the 20 values: whereas work ranks high among women, pleasure and freedom are more valued by men! Could it be that individuals tend to prize the things they lack?

DISCUSSION

Based on the twenty values organized according to the six given dimensions, we may draw the following conclusions:

- Hedonistic fulfilment (hygiene, pleasure, dreams, freedom, and quality of life) is, when confronted with the list of explanatory variables, closely correlated (by decreasing order of importance) with country (among the Portuguese, hedonistic values rank high), political convictions, and the absence of religious beliefs. These values "score" more points among men. One may question the hedonistic character of freedom insofar as there is a decisive relation between it and political convictions;
- Socio-emotional fulfilment (friendship, happiness, love, dignity, and well-being), when compared against the variables, shows to be closely associated with: country (the French), philosophical convictions, a low level of stress, artistic activities, the absence of religious beliefs, and age (young people clearly place more emphasis on these values);
- Pragmatic commitment (money, work, and protection) is correlated with country (the French), gender (women), the absence of philosophical convictions, a negative assessment of one's health, family impermanence, age (the elderly), and socioeconomic status (precariousness). It should be noted that precariousness is not significantly associated with values, except for the three mentioned here, undoubtedly because of lack or shortage of them (money, work, and social protection);
- Community commitment (solidarity, equality, and help) is correlated with country (the Portuguese), and philosophical convictions. Unlike what might be expected, the three values have no significant connection with integration or political convictions;
- Traditional security (health and family) is associated with country (the French), stable families, a positive appreciation of family relationships, the absence of philosophical convictions, the impossibility of going shopping, a high level of stress, religious convictions, and the feeling of being socially useful;
- Idealised aspiration (luck and religion) interacts mainly with religious convictions, a negative appreciation of family relationships, the absence of political convictions, unsatisfactory appreciation of living conditions, including an individual personal space. It also interacts with body care, and the feeling of social fulfillment.

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