

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

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Self-perception of social integration constitutes an important dimension to be evaluated on studying how individuals respond to situations that threaten their well-being and may render them vulnerable.

This kind of research should analyse the way in which individuals deal with adverse situations by integrating new empirical and conceptual contributions, particularly the concept of resilience, which refers to the individual's capability to endure adversity (Garmezy, 1996).

Social integration may be associated with close relationships, professional and everyday activities, leisure time, means of communication and transport, means of ensuring a minimum level of hygiene and comfort, and the possession of assets and objects. Nevertheless, evaluating integration must not restrict itself to these objective indicators. Subjective dimensions should be taken into consideration, in particular the perception that individual have of their standing in the social (relational and institutional) system, which is also associated with convictions and beliefs.

The present evaluation of integration is part of a broader comparative study conducted among individuals who live in a precarious socioeconomic situation and others who have not experienced that kind of precariousness in their lives. This exploratory study comprises several different psychosocial adaptation variables (Tap & Vasconcelos, 2004) and includes two integration dimensions, the objective and the subjective ones. Of these two dimensions, the one approached in this paper is subjective representation, and a global score of integration was obtained.

METHOD

Participants

► N = 449

	Portugal (Coimbra)	France (Toulouse)	Total
Male	68	156	225
Female	81	144	224
Precarious situation	42	150	192
Not precarious situation	107	150	257

Materials

► The Integration Scale was developed by Tap and Vasconcelos (2004). It is a scale of the Likert type, ranging from 1 point (I totally disagree) to 5 points (I totally agree), and it includes 6 items, which enables us to obtain a global score of integration that may range from a minimum of 6 points to a maximum of 30 points. The global mean for the total of our sample is 21,32 (DP=4,97). The six items regard feelings of responsibility, integration, social usefulness and success, satisfaction in terms of living conditions, and evaluation of body care.

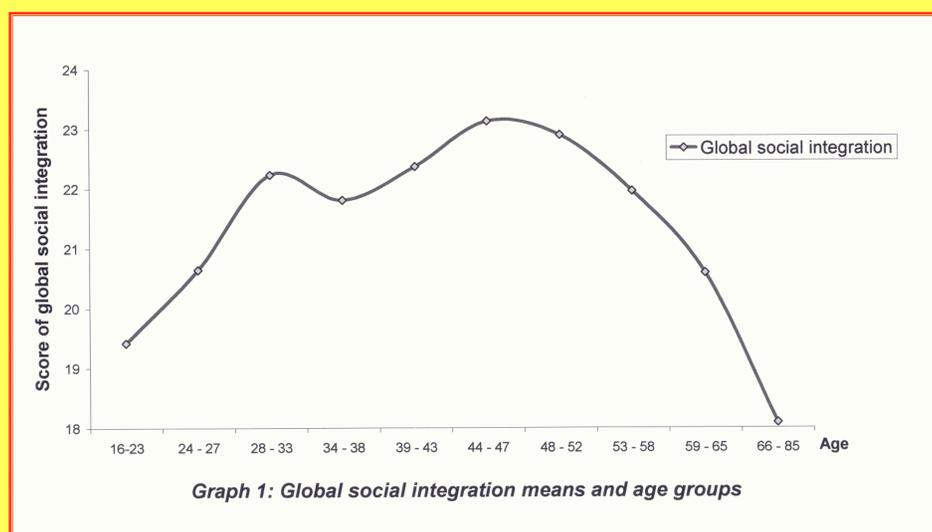
Procedure

► 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.

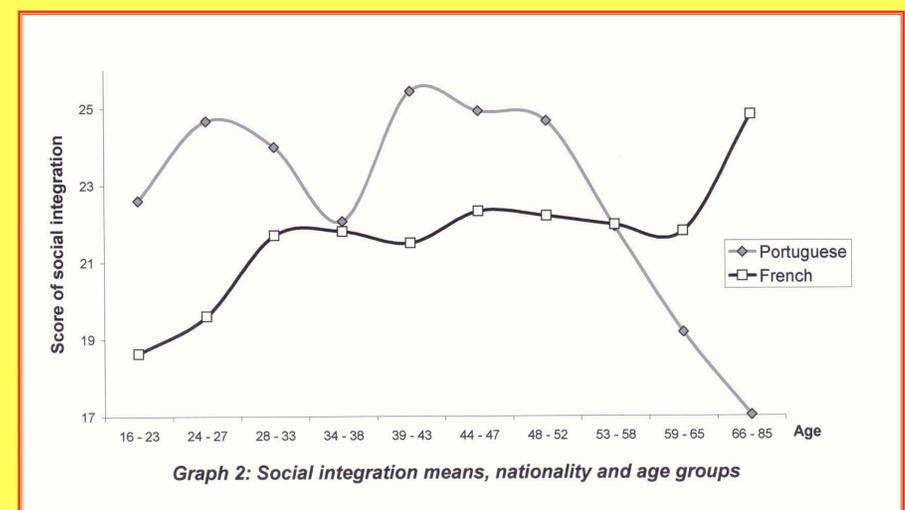
RESULTS

► The study of the internal consistency of this social integration scale shows an adequate level of homogeneity: Cronbach's alfa for the global population=.75; the French=.70; the Portuguese=.82. We may consider the items of the scale to be good indicators of the subjective representation of integration.

The analysis of the results in terms of age groups showed that the global integration score tends to increase until 47, and it decreases after that age (Graph 1).



✓ On comparing the results obtained in terms of countries, we observed that the Portuguese who live in a situation of precariousness (M=17,19) feel less integrated than the French who experience the same situation (M=19,40). A separate analysis of the results of the Portuguese and the French, in terms of age, shows that, as a rule, the latter have lower integration levels, with the exception of individuals over 66 years of age, in which a total reversal of the trend may be observed (Graph 2). In this age group, the differences between the French (M=24,83) and the Portuguese (M=17,03) are significant ($p<.01$).



✓ In terms of gender, there are no noteworthy differences both in the Portuguese sample and in the French sample. However, the French who live in a precarious situation perceive themselves as being better integrated (M=16,18) than their Portuguese counterparts in the same situation (M=17,5). Of all the groups studied, the one with a higher score is that of the Portuguese men who do not live in a situation of precariousness (M=24,29 versus M=21,46 for the women).

The separate study of six elements in the scale yields the following results:

- 1 - The *feeling of responsibility* is more directly determined by the socioeconomic situation – people in a non-precarious situation feel more responsible than those in a precarious one ($F=40,38$; $p<.09$) – and by country ($F=2,92$; $p<.08$) – the French feel more responsible than the Portuguese. It should be noted that men feel more responsible than women, and this difference is more marked in Portugal than in France.
- 2 - In the item referring to the *feeling of integration*, the socioeconomic situation associated with the country appears to influence the results. In this case, it is Portuguese women who have a stronger feeling of integration, while Portuguese men have a lower score. Once again, Portuguese women feel more integrated than Portuguese men, when they both experience precariousness.
- 3 - In the item about the *feeling of social usefulness*, the results were the same as in the previous item, which means that there is joint influence of the variables precariousness and country, and that influence shows the same trend. The women who are in a precarious situation feel more useful than their male counterparts, both in France and in Portugal.
- 4 - The socioeconomic situation is the only variable determining the answers about the *feeling of social success*: “precarious” individuals reach higher levels than “non-precarious” ones. However, it should also be noted that the feeling of success is stronger among Portuguese women than among Portuguese men, especially among people who are experiencing a situation of precariousness.
- 5 - Precariousness plays a decisive role in the *degree of satisfaction* derived from living conditions. As expected, “precarious” people make a worse evaluation of their situation, and the Portuguese in a precarious situation are happier than their French counterparts in a similar situation, in spite of their living conditions being less favourable.
- 6 - The *evaluation of body care*: the socioeconomic situation, associated with the country, is the most relevant factor. People in a non-precarious situation take better care of their bodies than people in a precarious situation, the French surpassing the Portuguese in this respect.

DISCUSSION

As a rule, people who are not experiencing a precarious situation perceive themselves as being better integrated.

The French feel more integrated than the Portuguese.

The differences associated with gender are not significant. However, more specifically, men feel more responsible and more satisfied with their material conditions, while women feel more integrated and socially useful. Portuguese women in a difficult situation, in both professional and socioeconomic terms, tend to adapt more easily: they feel better integrated than men in a similar situation, and feel of more use to those closest to them. They mention their social success more frequently than men.

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