Cohabiting in Multiethnic Community: Forms, Representations and Images of the Diversity

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Abstract—Modern culture, based on disinhibition of cultural trends and on *heterodirection*, is promoting openmindedness attitudes towards ethnic diversity, but on the other hand also new forms of social representations of the foreigner. Social representation is situated between the psychic field and the social one; it is the representation of oneself and of the other one, hanging between social categories and individual inner world. We will produce the results of a research on the representation of the foreigner, built on the type of prejudice prevailing among middle-low or middle-high educational qualification subjects, in which prejudicial attitudes seem to descend from precise mental images of the foreigner.

Keywords—Community, Diversity, Integration, Prejudice, Representations.

I. INTRODUCTION

MASSES find in such stereotypes a "collective" defense against the *strangerness* of the other one, of the different and the "strange" one. These notes deal with the problem of human unity and diversity, often splitted in several polarities: good/bad, beautiful/ugly, unity and solidarity against heterogeneity and conflict. From the Community Psychology point of view we have to stop thinking of homogeneity implicitly as a value and about diversity as "monstrosity" from which to defend oneself or to shrink from.

We will introduce our idea of *cohabitation*, including in it both of the semantic fields of the English words cohabitation and *coexisting*. So cohabitation means, in the strict sense of the word, living together physically, sharing the same spaces, being in close contact with another one, but also, in a figurative sense, the possibility to exist at the same time, without cancelling each other out or being mutually exclusive.

Consequently, we will present the plan of action to promote, from the Community Psychology point of view, the multiethnic cohabitation, built on the acquaintance of the other one.

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II. THEORICAL PREMISES: THE REPRESENTATION AND THE ICON OF DIVERSITY

Social representation is produced by an individual, deeply immersed in a socially defined time and space, in an archetypical and imaginary collective mind (of Jungian memory) which performs every individual experience, because of the transmission of meanings and symbolisms through the memory of mankind.

Social representations are not simply opinions or attitudes, but "cognitive systems, ingenuous theories or branches of knowledge that we use to discover and organize reality" [1].

They have two main purposes: giving individuals a guide to orientate themselves in the social field and offering them a reading code for their personal and group history.

Ideology is rational, referring to a conceptual and logical field, while social representation needs a shared symbolic world, basis of its irrational and incoherent nature. Ideology 'is' (of an age, a society, of the ruling class), while representation is what we 'would like it were' (because of our fears, anxieties and wishes).

Considering ideology as the rational side of social representation, which is instead filled up with unconscious, we can also define the differences between stereotype and social icon, borrowing from Freud his primary and secondary processes. They are different ways for the psyche to acknowledge a quality to an object: first of all its extraterritoriality and its proper signification [2].

Stereotype comes from the secondary process, leant as it is towards the outer world to define and classify it. Icon descends from the primary process; desires and drives, also in their conflicting aspects, belong to it. According to these characteristics, icon displaces itself from a representation to another, through an imaginary web, made partly by the individual personal history and partly by the social signification. Icon refers to the narrative memory of men, made by a *con-fusion* of images, contrary to the stereotypical simplification of words.

The core of the representation of the foreigner is his icon; it sums up several aspects: the other one, the stranger, is also immigrant, ill, homosexual; it means runaway, choice and hospitality all at the same time. It includes conflicting elements, not always negative; everyone of us has a quote of *strangerness*, and it regards more likely seeking shelter and protection, than boundary violation of the other one's spaces. Thinking about the foreigner's icon means thinking of a man

who ventures on a journey to find another sense to his uniqueness.

At the basis of the representations there is not actual reality, but a culture filtered reality, a reconstruction of the world made of imaginary material, of dreams, thoughts, hopes.

The representation of the foreigner is useful to handle reality in three main ways:
- organization;
- distortion;
- knowledge.

Organization is used to clear and simplify: the stereotype refers to an entire ethnic group and it's possible to infer single members behaviour from it.

Distortion aims to manipulate actual facts: the economic function of stereotypes is to hide ruling class advantages against the dominated group.

Finally, the representation of the foreigner can work as a prejudice, for holding and defensive purposes: it is not an instrument to order or to manipulate reality any more, but becomes a way to construct and to create it, with no need to know by experience. The cognitive act is now guided by the 'anxiety to anticipate' and by the 'greed for certainty'.

That shows the reason why the foreigner is considered as a disturbing element: he's out of our conventional prototypes.

Mechanisms used by the ruling group to construct the representation of the dominated one are mainly *devaluation* and *inversion* [3], by which the other one is depreciated to the extreme, till his physical and cultural features become diametrically opposite to mine [4], no matter if the results are far from reality.

The heightening of these mechanisms may lead to represent the features of the other one as real 'monstrosities', in its very meaning of deformity, being discordant from the form we are used to [5] [6]. 'Monstrosity' is linked to the impossibility to signify what cannot be signified.

III. THE RESEARCH

The results of a survey carried out among young people (between 18 and 27 years of age), resident in Palermo and in its province, separated by gender and by educational qualification (middle-low educational level subjects vs. university students), show how socially built and shared stereotypes influence the attitudes we have towards the foreigner.

We presented to the subjects two photos, representing a group of foreigner kids having a good time and an immigrant cleaning a car window; the photos were both followed by an open question, asking what the represented people are doing.

Answers were classified in a limited number of categories, to compare and analyse them. The purpose was showing how the answers to the photographic stimuli reflect the representations the society transmit to the individual, and how it's easy to find defensive, prejudicial or stereotypical attitudes beyond them. Actually, we found positive and negative feelings coexisting in some macro-categories like fear, pity,

manifest prejudice, integration, indifference, explicit scorn, hospitality, social differences.

IV. THE RESULTS

To the first photo, the one representing foreigner kids in an attitude of joy, almost every subject answered that they were celebrating a traditional feast of their country. We classified these answers in the *social differences* macro-category, because it's evident that subjects feel the diversity and the non-integration of other ethnic groups in our community. The frequent use of the personal pronoun 'they' may be a way to define what is ingroup and what is outgroup.

A significant number of answers had to be classified in the *manifest prejudice* macro-category: sentences like 'they are happy because they are free from slavery now' or 'because the war is over' or like 'somebody is taking advantage of them', show the presence of the prejudice by which immigrants are poor, socially disadvantaged and always dependent from a stronger community for their sustenance.

Such category of answers was prevalent in the middle-low educational level class of subjects, as if the lower education meant less consciousness of our responsibility in the immigrants difficulties. The same class of subjects gave the most of the answers linked to the *pity* category: sentences like 'they are not happy', 'they beg dancing'.

Very interesting is the wide use of negation, at the beginning of almost every sentence (for example: 'they are not having fun', 'they are doing nothing' or 'I don't care about them'). We know negation is a defence mechanism aiming to avoid to reveal an embarassing feeling: here shows a latent aggressivity towards immigrants and the fear to assume responsibility for such a problem.

A smaller number of answers has been included in the *integration* and *hospitality* categories: sentences like 'they are happy because Italians let them stay in Italy', or 'they are celebrating their new city' reveal the persistent feeling of diversity, even in the positive attitudes towards foreigner people, probably because of the persisting conviction by which integration is homologation with the autochthonous community. Real integration starts instead from the rediscovering of diversity as a resource, and from an experience of *contact* among ethnic groups.

A large number of answers to the second photo, representing an immigrant cleaning a car window, has been classified in the *manifest prejudice* macro-category: sentences like 'he is cleaning the window because he has not a job', 'because most of the immigrants do', show the presence of the stereotype of the immigrant as a socially disadvantaged person.

Strong and negative emotions came out explicitly facing with an adult immigrant. The few answers in the *integration* and *hospitality* categories revealed evidently ambivalent feelings towards him, between solidarity and prejudice.

The analysis of the survey shows how subjects still consider immigrants as *disempowered* people, socially, economically and culturally disadvantaged.

V. INTERVENTION HYPOTHESIS

Having prejudices is not directly linked to racist acts, but might cause marginalization attitudes, aiming to keep immigrants as an *outgroup* [7] [8].

Seeking after the multiethnic cohabitation urges us to find ways to intervene in such dynamics. Having not a direct acquaintance of the other one is just a risk of prejudice; every lack of knowledge could be actually filled with socially built stereotypes, holding and strengthening our fears and hopes towards the other. It is puzzling how the most of the subjects we interviewed that showed negative attitudes towards immigrants admitted they have never had direct acquaintance with them. So prejudices can never be disproved [9] [10].

Consequently the intervention plan we propose, from a community psychology point of view, means to:

- *develop* a *competent community*, able to acknowledge political, social and cultural restrictions but also to rediscover the value of diversity [11];
- seek the highest integration between people and their environment, to improve the *collective consciousness* of the problems;
- build a *trans-ethnic sense of community*, carrying out a plan of mutual participation of autochthones and immigrants to the life of the community, to find transitional spaces where people could meet each other and grow up together [12].

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