

Media as a source of information in the construction of social representations

*Los medios de comunicación como
fuente de información en la construcción
de representaciones sociales de la
delincuencia*

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This article aims to discuss the methodology applied to explore the role of different sources of information in the construction of social representations on delinquency. Results show three types of sources of information: intrapersonal, interpersonal and massive. It was possible to find out that three elements determine the importance of each source: credibility, frequency and accessibility.

KEYWORDS: Social representations, media, cultural studies audience research, sources of information, qualitative methodology.

El objetivo del artículo es proponer el método utilizado para explorar las fuentes de información en la construcción de representaciones sociales sobre delincuencia. Los resultados de la investigación arrojaron tres tipos de fuentes: las intrapersonales, interpersonales y las masivas. La credibilidad, frecuencia y accesibilidad a cada fuente fueron los factores más relevantes para determinar la importancia de cada una de ellas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Representaciones sociales, medios de comunicación, estudios culturales de audiencia, fuentes de información, métodos cualitativos.

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INTRODUCTION

Interviewer: we are going to make a second drawing. This time I'm going to ask you to draw someone like the Zetas that you have just mentioned.

Katy: [She starts drawing] I used to imagine them like Homer Simpson.

Interviewer: Like Homer Simpson? Why?

Katy: Because I used to be told that Homer Simpson was bad. I was not allowed to watch "The Simpsons" because "it was not for children". And in fact, it is not for children.

(Katy, girl, MA-A²)

In a conflict situation, the individual resorts to the construction of social representations to reduce the feeling of threat or fear (Jovchelovitch, 2001). This article presents a fragment of a study conducted during the years 2012-2014, whose objective was to explain the sources of information that children between 9 and 12 years of age used to construct their social representations about insecurity and crime, in Monterrey, Mexico (Inzunza, 2014).

In a context where crime rate was on the rise due to conflicts among organized crime groups and the government, where the agenda of the media was saturated with information concerning insecurity, and where schools were forced to implement drills about what to do in case of shootings, it was important to study how the children in the municipality San Pedro Garza García in the Monterrey metropolitan area understood the issue of crime in the city. To this end, 45 interviews were conducted with children who belonged to families of medium high and medium low socioeconomic levels, so that it was possible to make a comparison of the social representations and sources of information among them.

The objective of this article is, first of all, to show the compatibility of the theory of Social Representations and Cultural Studies on

² The codes to identify each of the participants in the quotes consist in the following information: pseudonym chosen by the participants themselves, sex and socioeconomic level (where MA-A is upper middle-upper class, and MB is lower-middle class).

audience, due to the fact that many of its logic systems and concepts complement each other. Secondly, to share the methodological proposal that intended to explore both theories within the study. And finally, to make an analysis of the role the mass media play with respect to other sources of information.

Regarding the methodological proposal, it is important to advance that two techniques were used previously: drawing dynamics during the focalized interview and the creation of narratives. Two studies were the source of inspiration to use this methodology: Lemish and Götz (2007) and Bar-Tal and Teichman (2005).

In the development of the methodology an attempt was made to prove the following as new strategies: 1) the detonation of the issue of insecurity in children, without mentioning the topic explicitly. In addition to facilitating the authorization by the educational institutions and the parents, this allowed knowing how the issue is reflected in the children's minds in a more genuine manner. And 2) contrasting the terms, which allowed knowing the meanings that are deposited in some of the concepts that children use, regardless of whether they are aware of their definition or not.

POINTS IN COMMON BETWEEN CULTURAL STUDIES ON AUDIENCE AND THE THEORY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

The theory of Social Representations (SR) and Cultural Studies on Audience are very compatible from their own different disciplines. While the former has its foundation on concepts coming from Social Psychology, the latter is interdisciplinary. Having this character is in addition convenient to the *Media Studies*, given that they need other theoretical and methodological approaches to carry out their research.

Firstly, it is necessary to point out that SR do not only refer to an image (such as an *imaginarium*), but also to a series of judgments and ideas that influence the individual's behavior (Araya, 2002). Moscovici (2001) speaks also about a function of collectivity of said SR, because behavior is not only influenced by them, but also by a "social contract" of sorts that exists in the community where it develops. The same author indicates that his social contract is established and reinforced constantly

in that given society thanks to the opinion leaders (politicians, priests, educators, the mass media, among other institutions).

Social construction and communication are essential to the SR theory and that is why the psychosocial triangle between Ego –Subject–, Alter and Object is crucial to explain the construction –and reconstruction– of SR. In this scheme, Object is that around which the SR are constructed, it is what is attempted to be understood and adopted as part of the individual’s reality. Alter refers to the sources of information with which the Subject interacts, and it has as a consequence the construction, modification or updating of SR (Araya, 2002). That is precisely why at the moment in which the study was conducted, it was practically impossible for only one message to have been the absolute reference of social representation on the issue of insecurity. That is, it started from the premise that each and every one of the Subjects interviewed had already interacted with different Alters that allowed complexity and at the same time diversity in the SR, in spite of the fact that the same Objects were mentioned (Insecurity and Crime).

Even if the participants had been exposed to the same Alters –who will be referred to as sources of information in this text–, Cultural Studies on Audience speak of the concept of “mediations”, which make the reception process of a message complex. Mediations are understood as “structuring instances of the interaction among the members of the audience, which particularly shape the negotiation they make with the messages and influence the results of the process” (Orozco, 1991, p.74). According to the same author, there are individual mediations such as sex, age, cognitive capacity, cultural knowledge, education, socioeconomic level; institutional mediations such as the family, religion, work, school, mass media; situational mediations, which surround the space and time of reception; and video-technological mediations, regarding the technology of the device on which the message is transmitted. All these mediations influence the way in which the message is *negotiated*.

Another important concept that is used in Cultural Studies on Audience is representation. According to Barker (2008), “texts, as a form of representation, are polysemic. That is, they contain the possibility of a number different meanings that have to be created by the readers who bring to life the words and images” (p. 11). It is thanks to this

characteristic that the possibility of an active audience is considered, an audience in which, in Barker's words (2008), the audiences are not cultural inept, but rather active producers of meanings from their own cultural contexts.

The problem of the representation of reality is related with the intention that certain media texts have of being "realistic", such as news shows and documentaries. Regardless of whether a program is realistic or not, it always involves a process of representation, therefore it is important for studies like the one presented in this article to seek the gap existing between "reality" and "media representation" (Götz, interpersonal communication, 2014).

Scholars studying social representations particularly often stress the need to observe the media because they are an inevitable part in the SR construction processes in individuals. For example, Wagner and Kronberger (2001) indicate its importance in the consolidation of SR, but they also speak of the interpersonal conversations that legitimize the media discourses. The value of this methodological proposal precisely lies in considering not only the mass media, but also other communicative processes (inter and intrapersonal ones) in understanding the reality expressed by the participants.

It is precisely the complex perspective of this "negotiation" of meanings, and therefore of imaginarium and attitudes, which both theories defend. The points in common lie in the fact that the construction processes of social representations speak of how the individual –in their role as the audience, for example– actively creates, modifies and updates them, choosing, on the basis of different factors of the person, the sources of information that fulfill their needs and interests.

METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL: QUESTIONING THE SOURCES

The methodology used had a qualitative character; focalized interviews were used with the support of the drawing technique. Forty-five interviews were conducted individually with children whose ages ranged from 9 to 12 years (6th grade of primary school) in four institutions. Two schools have students from a medium low socioeconomic level (where 22 interviews were conducted), while the

other two schools have students that belong to the medium high or high levels (23 interviews).

Given that anonymity agreements were signed, the two schools visited cannot be cited, but it is important to mention that more schools were contacted than the ones that agreed to participate. In general, there were a lot of refusals to participate in this research project, due to the fact that the family or the authorities in these schools avoided addressing the issue of crime with minors. It is important to underscore that though all of the schools were located in the municipality of San Pedro Garza García, not all the participants lived there at the moment the interview was carried out.

Another observation: the author is responsible for this research, since it was she who carried out its design, made the contacts, the transcriptions and the report of the results in different types of documents. However, in order to meet some of the indications made by two of the schools, three other researchers participated as interviewers. This was due to the fact that some schools allowed access during a certain period of time on limited dates. With the support of colleagues, it was possible to conduct the number of interviews planned in the time frame indicated by the participant schools.

The dynamics of the session consisted in first detonating the issue of insecurity and crime. In order to appease the parents' and teachers' concern, regarding the fact that the interviews might convey ideas of violence or information that was considered inappropriate for their age, we started from the premise that if the children did not answer the following questions mentioning something about the topics at hand, the interview would be considered finished:

- a) Imagine that you are with someone who has never been in Mexico before... What can you tell them about your country?
- b) If they ask you about Monterrey, what would you tell them?
- c) If they ask you what the situation is like, what would you say?
- d) Do you watch the news? What do they usually talk about?
- e) Is there anything that worries you about what the news or your parents say about what happens in Monterrey? Why?

In addition to facilitating their parents' authorization to interview the children who participated, these initial questions allowed to approach the issue in a more authentic manner. It is important to point out that there was no need to cancel any of the interviews (with 45 children), and most of the time question C was the trigger. Once the issue of insecurity and crime was brought up, the following section of the interview was started directly.

The following stages in the interview were called "Situation of Insecurity", which sought to find out what crimes they were thinking about at the moment they spoke about insecurity, as well as a broad description of the setting, that is, places, times, characters, storytelling (what happened before and after the moment drawn); and "The Criminal", whose purpose was to know the stereotypes around the criminal, this section asked questions about their appearance and physical traits, personality, habits, discourses, social relations, spaces and biography. Both sections of the interview started asking the interviewees to draw a scene of insecurity as well as a criminal. Once the drawing was in progress, they were asked questions aimed at knowing the social representations the children had regarding both questions.

Following the descriptive analysis, some questions were dedicated to recognizing the attitudes in situations of insecurity and crime. To this end, they were asked why they thought these incidents occurred, what the role of the authorities and government officials is in this regard, what should happen to the criminal and what solutions should be implemented to solve these problems.

Finally each of the two stages ended questioning the sources:

- a) Where have you seen things like the ones in your drawing happen? Or where have you seen people like the ones in your drawing? Were you alone or accompanied by someone when you saw it/them? Did anyone explain to you what was happening or who they were and what they were doing? Who?
- b) Do you speak with your friends about this? How do you find out about these incidents? What do you think of people like the criminals?

- c) Have you spoken with your parents about these incidents/people? What have they said? What do they think the authorities should do about it?
- d) At school, do your teachers, coordinators or classmates speak about these incidents or people with you? What do they say?
- e) Have you directly seen a person like the one you drew in your picture on the street, in the city? Have you been the victim or witness of an incident of violence?
- f) Have you seen a criminal on TV? What were they saying about this person on TV? What program did you see them on? Was it the news, a soap opera, or another kind of program?
- g) Have you seen these people/incidents in the papers? What was it? Who was it? What did the papers say about this person? What did the papers explain about the incident?
- h) Have you heard about an incident or person like the one you drew on the radio? Have you seen them in a film?
- i) Have you seen something similar to what you drew on the Internet? On what webpage? What did it say about it?
- k) Have you played any video games where someone or something similar to your drawing appears?

These questions covered almost everything the participants could initially remember as spectacular on the streets, with the exception of the printed media (the example that was mentioned, even though it was just one time, was the propaganda by the Partido Verde Ecologista that promoted “Death penalty for kidnappers”). The purpose of question a) on this stage of the interview was to identify the sources they considered to be the most important in their construction of the SR. Several premises are used as the basis for this: the similarity with the drawing made, visual clarity, fascination or impact that the source had on the participant and how recent the exposure had been.

Similarity with the drawing made is somewhat evident because it is what the responder was imagining at the moment the question was asked. Though their sources of inspiration for the image could have been multiple, they usually had as basis a more important one, the one that emerged when this was asked.

Visual clarity is an important element because children would draw scenarios they understood in a way so that they could create a story and an illustration about it. That is also why it was more complex to create images of more serious crimes such as drug traffic, kidnapping or extortion, which were seen less frequently, whereas more pictures of armed robbery were repeated, which are scenarios that can be witnessed repeatedly in different media formats, even in cartoons targeting children.

The fascination or impact that the source may have caused on the participant is a supposition based above all on the children who were witnesses or who are usual players of a specific video game (the clearest example was with the franchise of *Grand Theft Auto*). Rodrigo Luna (boy, MA-A), for example, had detailed answers, he told us about a personal experience where his relatives were the victims of a kidnapping and murder (he supposes that it was caused by organized crime in his home state). On the other hand, the example of Sponge Bob (boy, MB), he drew the picture that usually causes the strongest impact, it shows the murder of four women: two were hanged, one was mutilated and the other was shot. He mentioned that, though he did not have his mother's permission, he constantly played different versions of GTA.

Finally, regarding how recent the exposure had been, it is reported that some of the sources mentioned were being shown at the moment of the interview, or sources that they had had access to on recent dates. For example, several children belonging to the medium low socioeconomic level mentioned "El Bazucazo" (2012) repeatedly, a pirate copy of which they had bought. Both groups of socioeconomic levels often mentioned the movie series *The Fast and Furious*, whose 6th installment was released right in the summer when the interviews began.

The following stage was "Contrasting terms", the interviewer took notes during the session to be able to ask questions about the concepts used by the children. The concept of "corruption" was the only one that was directly asked to all the participants, but other terms used were: sicarios, cartel, kidnapping, rape, drug traffic, among others. The children were asked directly if they knew what the words meant and then they were asked to "define them in their own words".

The closing of the interview consisted of a series of questions about the resolution of the conflicts described, that is, when they thought this could end, how this solution would take place, whether they would like to have more information about it, what their contribution in the resolution of these conflicts could be, and how they felt about the current situation.

The design of the questionnaire turned out to be effective in the sense that most of the respondents understood the language and answered with the information required. Confusion was minimal and they managed to be solved entirely thanks to the interviewers. The problems presented when answering were associated with memory, which may have been affected in turn by the nervousness of some of the respondents.

The stage of analysis of the results allowed recognizing sources of information. For example, TV, film and video game, clichés were found in the storytelling, which though not explicitly mentioned by the respondents, it was not difficult to recognize them. An example was a helicopter chase after a bank robbery drawn by Karina (girl, MB); or the case of a narco-blockade³ in the city, created by Cristy (girl, MA-A), though the participant was not able to fully understand this type of incidents; she had visual clarity about it.

On the other hand, the drawings were triangulated with colleagues from a Belgian and two Mexican universities, and undergraduate students in an American and two Mexican universities. Through these presentations, a debate was launched about the images to broaden the analysis to several perspectives. This allowed identifying new sources that had not been reported by the children, but to others, it was easy to identify TV programs, cartoons and video games. That was the case of the drawing by Messi (boy, MB), who added Santa Muerte (Saint Death) on a murder crime scene, based on the character of the Grim Reaper from the animated series *The Grim Adventures of Billy & Mandy* (2003).

These strategies allowed recognizing several sources of information that the participants did not mention as such in the interviews, and thus integrating them as part of the analysis of results.

³ Narco-blockade was the name given to the incidents in which members of organized crime block the freeways or avenues to create traffic chaos.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA REGARDING THE OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Three types of sources of information were identified: intrapersonal, interpersonal and mass sources. Intrapersonal sources refer to those cases in which the participants witnessed an instance of a crime and/or violence, since they had no other intermediary to find out about it. They are in turn divided into two subtypes: direct witness, when the participants experienced an incident of violence or crime; and indirect witness, for example, Beto (boy, MA-A) who experienced the kidnapping of a relative. Interpersonal sources are those that imply a dialog, such as the family, friends and relationships at school (for example teachers and classmates). Mass sources are those from the media: the papers, the news, radio, TV programs, cartoons, films, video games, commercials, among others.

Each type of source has a different prevalence, depending on the perspective from which it is analyzed. For the purposes of this study, there are three questions that should be taken into account to evaluate what the most important one could be in the process for the construction of social representations: the credibility assigned to each type of source, the frequency of exposure to each type of source and accessibility to them.

For the purposes of these findings, credibility is understood as the trust these children have in this source of information, and in the interview it was reflected on how much or how little the children question it. Frequency is the number of times in certain periods (according to each participant) that they are exposed to the source of information, as indicated. And finally, accessibility has to do with the possibilities the child has to see, read, listen to or interact with a specific source of information, according to what the respondent mentioned.

Intrapersonal sources are the most important ones with respect to credibility, because it is they themselves who experienced directly or indirectly the situation of a crime. The experience generated unquestionable knowledge in the participants, even when there was room for interpretations. That was the case of Abe (boy, MA-A), who was the direct witness of a robbery in a convenience store (that is, he

was present at the moment of the incident), and despite the fact that it was not possible to prove it, he was convinced that the thief was a mason.

However, it is important to recognize that frequency of exposure is the least relevant among all the types of sources and therefore they are less accessible. It is evident that there is a constantly active intention in preventing being the victim or witness of some criminal incident. We started from the premise that the intrapersonal source could challenge a hegemonic view with respect to violence, and it was not like that. The criminals' images were similar to the descriptions provided by the two children who had been direct witnesses and shared their experience (Abe, boy, MA-A; Carlos, boy, MB): man, adult, low socioeconomic level, dark-skinned, dirty looking. That is, through these experiences, they reinforced the discourses about the criminals, in the sense that the criminal is always a poor man with a (stereotypical) phenotype that is clearly Mexican.

Interpersonal sources play an intermediate role in all the aspects, lack thereof proved to be more credible in comparison with the mass media; and in case of the direct and indirect witness, the family, friends and their school relationships were the most important complements to understand their personal experience.

Nevertheless, there were few informers that perceived these sources as accessible. In most cases, the children pointed out that family members and teachers do not like to speak about this issue or that the topic was treated as taboo. That is, when they asked questions to clear up their doubts, adults answered without explaining their doubts very well. This was evident at the moment in which we were trying to locate participants for this study, since many institutions and parents refused to authorize their children to be interviewed. In addition, the adults censored mass media information, because when the children were faced with some content related with the issue of violence or insecurity, the parents changed channels or hid the newspapers.

In the case of friends or other classmates, they mentioned that in general, there was disinterest or ignorance of the issue. Though interpersonal sources continue to be more accessible than intrapersonal ones, they were not the main source of information.

The mass media sources that were explored and found were the following: the newspapers, radio, television (fiction programs, the news, cartoons, telenovelas), films, video games and the Internet. It was to be expected that the news and the newspapers represented two credible and frequent sources of information about this topic, because their nature is not only to represent reality objectively, but also their agenda was aligned daily with the issue of insecurity in the city, at the moment the study was conducted.

At this point, it is important to remember that not only was the agenda of the news shows and the newspapers saturated with the issue of crime, but also the TV series, telenovelas and films, both commercial and independent ones, were inspired in legends related with drug traffic and organized crime to generate storytelling. Given the amount of intertextual contents of said fiction narratives, which was based on historic incidents associated with organized crime, or on easily recognized drug-traffic characters, on politicians and the Mexican clergy, it was no surprise to see that the participants also placed some degree of credibility in this type of genres that are not committed to represent reality the way the news or the papers are.

Regarding frequency and accessibility, the mass media are definitely the types of sources of information par excellence. Even cartoons have used the issue of crime (simple ones like burglaries, muggings or bank robberies), that is why the issue did not seem foreign or hard to understand.

In the case of those who were familiarized with video games such as *Grand Theft Auto* (2002), it was easier for them to understand the criminals' processes in planning and executing a crime. Possibly, the type of involvement entailed by a video game as opposed to a TV or film content is the main difference between the types of audiences. In general, more details or unusual elements were identified in the stories and the drawings among the children who mentioned video games; for example, mentioning that the head of the cartels has his office in a strip club, or that organized crime traffics in diamonds.

Regarding the radio, it is not a source they usually turn to. Some participants admitted that they are often exposed to the radio as they travel by car or bus, but they do not pay attention and at no moment was

it a source of information for their SR. And finally, respecting the use of the Internet, all of them have access to the web, whether at home or at the public library in their communities. However, for the purposes of access to information about crime, children tend to read about it on the social networks (what is published by their acquaintances), or sometimes through *YouTube* videos. Besides that, they seek to have access to the same contents that are available on TV (series, telenovelas, films) or in the newspapers.

Considering the three aspects, the average participant obtains the most information from the mass media sources, given that they make a convincing representation of reality, which makes it credible, it is accessible and after all, it very often presents the issue of crime and delinquency.

CONCLUSION

The points in common between SR and Cultural Studies on Audience are related in how both theories underscore the importance of communicative processes in understanding the individual's reality, just as it was pointed out in this article. Both recognize that the role of the mass media is structurally crucial in the consolidation of a social representation, and therefore in the consolidation of socially accepted agreements that are materialized in attitudes and behaviors.

The study of SR cannot avoid approaching, in turn, the analysis of the representations published by the media in different formats, genres and narratives. Cultural Studies on Audience, when researching the influence the media have on the formation of attitudes, stereotypes and imaginariums should approach the SR.

Regarding the effectiveness of the methodological design, the interviewees responded positively. It is worth noticing that, in circumstances where the children did not feel in the right space to speak freely about the issue of insecurity, the great majority turned out to be quite willing to discuss what little or much they knew about the topic. Over half of them answered all the questions eloquently and sometimes with details, even the questions that they did not seem to understand entirely.

The limitations of the section about sources of information, as mentioned in the corresponding paragraph, are rather related with memory, which may have been affected by the nervous state experienced by some of the respondents. However, no weakness worthy of being mentioned was detected in the design of the questionnaire or the dynamics of the interview.

And finally, the analysis allowed extracting three characteristics that result important when it comes to making a comparison of relevance among sources of information: credibility, accessibility and how recent the exposure to such source had been. After all, they are three factors that should be taken into account when studying different types of sources of information (as in the case of this study, which were classified as intrapersonal, interpersonal and mass).

It is imperative to define the role of the mass media as the individual's source of information, both from the theory of SR and from the Cultural Studies. The classifications of sources into these three categories (intrapersonal, interpersonal and mass) can be used in other studies, since it encompasses the different information interactions that an individual can have in their relation with the different alters.

The strengths of the studies that seek a holistic perspective of these interactions is precisely that thanks to them meanings are discovered and deposited in each of the sources. These meanings vary depending on the object of the social representation being explored. In the case of insecurity and crime, it is important to remember what Jovchelovitch (2001) mentioned in connection with the fact that SR are used to reduce the feeling of threat in a situation of conflict, such as the presence of organized crime in a society.

Moreover, the treatment given by each media format and genre to the object of SR is important. The case of insecurity causes confusion because, as pointed out previously, even the fiction narratives conferred a "realistic" sense to the representations. The polysemic character of the different media messages generates inevitably a wide range of interpretations in their audiences, although they are supported within a framework that promote stereotypes, generalizations, attitudes, feelings and forms of understanding.

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