

Representaciones sociales de padres sobre el ocio de los adolescentes

Parents' social representations about adolescents' leisure

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Resumen

En los Estados Unidos de América hay tres posiciones filosóficas antes de la recreación de los adolescentes (Larson y Seepersad, 2003): las actividades no estructuradas, las actividades estructuradas y la combinación de estas dos. Teniendo en cuenta la realidad de la sociedad que es la posición adoptada por los padres en Portugal para el ocio de sus hijos adolescentes?

La presente investigación trató de identificar las representaciones que los padres tienen sobre el ocio de sus hijos. El estudio incidió sobre 70 padres de adolescentes que frecuentaban el 3^{er} Curso de ESO en escuelas públicas de las ciudades portuguesas de Coimbra y de Santarém, a los cuales fueron realizadas entrevistas semiestructuradas. La técnica de tratamiento de la información utilizada fue el "análisis de contenido" (Bardin, 2008).

Para la mayoría de los padres el ocio de sus hijos tiene un significado connotado con el desarrollo. Representan tiempos en los cuales los adolescentes deben experimentar un vasto abanico de experiencias orientadas por un conjunto de principios de modo a contribuir para su formación.

Los entrevistados entienden, sobre todo, que deben ejercer un papel de modelación junto a sus hijos debiendo desarrollar conductas capaces de influenciar sus opciones y comportamientos. En términos de actividades a desarrollar durante el ocio de sus hijos, los encuestados privilegian, principalmente, el deporte, por razones de salud y por el hecho de tal práctica ser desarrollada en presencia de adultos que las coordinan u orientan.

En resumen, podemos decir que los puntos de vista mencionados por los padres parecen ir un poco en el sentido de defensa de las actividades estructuradas.

Palabras clave: representaciones, padres, adolescentes, ocio.

Abstract

In the United States, there are three philosophic positions in relation to adolescents' leisure (Larson & Seepersad, 2003): non-structured activities, structured activities, and a combination of the two. Taking into account the reality of Portuguese society, what position do parents adopt in relation to their adolescents' leisure?

This study's purpose was to identify the representations that parents have about their children's leisure. Semi-structured interviews (Ruquoy, 2005) were given to 70 parents of adolescents in their 9th year of state schools in the Portuguese cities, Coimbra and Santarém. The data treatment technique that was utilized was "content analysis" (Bardin, 2008).

For most parents, their children's leisure is seen as part of their development. Adolescents must try a wide range of experiences oriented toward a sort of values and principles that contribute to their overall development. The majority of the interviewed parents feel that they must be a role model for their children, developing behaviours, attitudes, and initiatives that are capable of influencing their children's choices and behaviours. Concerning activities for their children's leisure, these parents mostly preferred sports, for health reasons and because its practice is supervised by adults. In summary, we can say that the viewpoints mentioned by these parents seem to support structured activities.

Key words: representations, parents, adolescents, leisure.

Introduction

Many profound changes have been taking place in society (Lipovetsky, 2007) that deeply impact adolescents' lives, profoundly changing their individual and collective identities, shaping their progress, and widening their ideological and sociological viewpoints (Coleman, 2000).

Adolescence gives rise to multiple changes whose development and interaction will allow teenagers to succeed in their search for identity and their relationships with others (Braconnier, 2002; Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2006). These social changes are better portrayed by adolescents nowadays with their ways of thinking and living, expressed in their clothing, songs, leisure and attitude towards morality, politics, family and education (Gervilla, 1993).

The word leisure has a wide range of interpretations, images, and concepts (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997; Parr & Lashua, 2004). Leisure, time when one is free from work or duties of any kind and available to spend time on one's own, should play an important role in everyone's life (Matos & Sampaio, 2009). Its importance is emphasized by Dumazedier (2000), who maintains that it comprises three functions: rest, fun and recreation, and development.

Leisure receives special attention in adolescence and appears to be an extremely complex issue (McHale, Crouter & Tucker, 2001; Parr & Lashua, 2004). Development activities influence the teenager's identity framework more and more in addition to their well-being (Fletcher, Nickerson & Wright, 2003), the development of behavioural problems (Piko & Vazsonyi, 2004), their relationships (Caldwell & Darling, 1999), as well as their future professional standards and opportunities (Munson & Savickas, 1998).

Family is one of the most important and visible social institutions and it strongly influences all of its members, supplying children and adolescents with a large set of rules and values which are decisive in their personal development (Giddens, 2000).

Lately, families have experienced a change in values and behaviours, marked by the recent introduction of women into the workforce, who are commuting, submitted to highly competitive labour contexts, and often doing tasks that are demanding, monotonous, and routine (Lopes, 2003).

Due to the job market's ever-changing quality and job uncertainty, insecurity, anguish, and inner doubt arise more and more in the professional sphere (Lipovetsky, 2007). Work disillusionment brings about a series of communication, sentimental, and familial disappointments.

Marriage crises have been increasing as well as the number of blended families, thus families are larger (Castells, 2002; Nelms, 1999). Some parents show great difficulties conciliating work and family, and therefore family life becomes busier and more chaotic (Castells, 2005).

Family plays a key role in adolescents' socialisation, from framing their life styles to the way they spend their leisure time (Gleitman, 2002); therefore, its performance is fundamental when defining attitudes, motivations, and behaviours associated with a teenager's involvement in certain types of leisure activities (Sharp, Caldwell, Graham & Ridenour, 2006).

Keeping in mind the importance of leisure for adolescents, researchers and various institutions have been giving attention to the family's key role in this matter.

According to Larson and Seepersad (2003), the United States of America (USA) holds three philosophical stands about adolescents' leisure. One of these three stands is related to "non-structured activities" and its supporters believe that young people need freedom to live their youth and that their preparation to enter society improves when they develop non-structured activities, alone or with friends.

Another stand is related to "structured activities", which are organized and monitored by adults and are essential to adolescents' development, while keeping in mind the non-structured activities or the time that is not monitored by adults, especially those activities with friends that promote deviant behaviours.

Lastly, another stand, "the rational" philosophy, combines aspects from the first two and recognizes the benefits of non-structured activities and group interaction, while defending that teenagers' development gets richer when adults lead and supervise it.

Regarding these three philosophies and taking into account the reality of the Portuguese society, what stand do Portuguese parents take concerning their adolescent's leisure?

Assessing this question requires getting familiar with and thinking about the way teenagers employ and take advantage of their leisure time, thus it seems important to know how the family stands on this issue. So, several questions may be asked (Delle Fave & Bassi, 2003): Do parents really know how their adolescents spend their leisure time? What experiences do they get when they are involved in those activities? What are their choices? What are the consequences to teenagers' socialization and development? Do parents worry about adolescents' development and socialization during those periods of time or not?

Therefore, the general aim of this research is to identify representations that parent's dwelling on urban context have on their adolescents' leisure. The specific aims are the following: i) to characterize the representations that parents have of their adolescents' leisure, ii) to become familiar with parents' perceptions of their role in their adolescents' leisure, iii) to assess parents' aspirations about the type of activities that their adolescents should develop in their leisure time.

Taking social representations theory (Moscovici, 1984) as a reference, the representation is a replica of something valuable for an individual or group, that acquires a certain meaning, thus becoming part of an individual or group's social reality (Charry Joya, 2006). Social representations are complex phenomena that must be carefully studied to understand the system of thought that supports social practice (Molina, Silva & Silveira, 2004).

Several international research studies (Delle Fave & Bassi, 2003; Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Larson & Seepersad, 2003; Sharp, Caldwell, Graham & Ridenour, 2006) have had the opportunity to study certain features related to parents' and teenagers' leisure. However, the authors recognized that these studies are still scarce and have many issues that need clarifying, such as the symbolisms shaping parents' stands on adolescents' leisure. Taking all this in consideration we have chosen a qualitative methodology, which, due to its potential (Denzin & Lincon, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), may provide helpful data for understanding the significance, perceptions, values, and expectations parents present concerning adolescents' leisure.

Methodology

The study involved 70 parents, selected by convenience (Flick, 2005). This included both males and females between 37 and 51 years of age, whose teenage children were in their 9th year of state schooling in the Portuguese cities Coimbra and Santarém. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the parents (Creswell, 1994; Ruquoy, 2005).

The script of the interview had as a basis some bibliographical references (some of which were: Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Larson & Seepersad, 2003; Sharp, Caldwell, Graham & Ridenour, 2006) and was outlined by the following research axis: i) parents' representations and attitudes about children's leisure; ii) parents' perceptions about the role they should play in their children's leisure; iii) parents' desires about the activity type their children perform in their leisure time.

The elaboration of the interview script took into account the methodological requirements defined by various authors (Bogdan & Birklen, 1994; Quivy & Campenhoudt, 1998; Ruquoy, 2005). Thus, the first version of the interview script was analysed by a group of experts. After some modifications, the script was applied to five people with the same characteristics as the study's population, which then led to reformulating some questions. After submitting the script once again for the experts' analysis, the final version of the interview script was obtained.

The interviews were conducted by us between March and April of 2010, and they lasted 30-45 minutes. The location of the interviews was the same for all respondents, and a calm and welcoming environment suitable for applying this research tool was sought.

The interviews were recorded with written authorization, as the body of the analysis involved the transcriptions of the interviews.

The data were treated using "content analysis" (Bardin, 2008; Creswell, 1994; Vala, 1986). In this study, we took into consideration the heuristic function of this technique (Bardin, 2008). Therefore, this study has an exploratory perspective, followed by a discovery, open-ended perspective, by letting the interviews speak for themselves. This option was given consideration due to the fact that there are few studies in this area (Delle Fave & Bassi, 2003; Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Larson & Seepersad, 2003; Sharp, Caldwell, Graham & Ridenour, 2006).

The construction of the category system was made *a posteriori*, following the methodological principles listed in the bibliography (Bardin, 2008). The categories that were used were subjected to other researchers in order to comply with standards relating to the reliability and validity of this process (Bogdan & Birklen, 1994; Creswell, 1994; Ghiglione & Matalon, 2001).

After the process of construction of categories, defining the units of analysis was done (Bardin, 2008; Vala, 1986): a) the unit that was recorded was thematic in nature, a semantic unit of registration; b) the contextual units consisted of all the interviews; c) with regard to the unit list, we chose to analyse the presence or absence of the unit and its frequency.

Empirical Data Analysis

Representations of leisure

Our reflection focused on parents' ideas, principles, and attitudes in relation to children's leisure. When questioned about the meaning of their children's lei-

sure time, the answers were mostly “Development Opportunities” (Table 1). Parents associate leisure with the idea of “looking toward the future”.

Along these lines, parents feel that there must be a series of conditioning and principles to take into consideration; hence, in their opinion *“I think, at the time, they should do what they like best, but afterwards, they should do things that are really important for their future”*; *“Once they have plenty of free time they must take advantage of this time to learn many important things”*.

Carneiro (2001) maintains that education does not limit itself only to certain stages or periods of one’s lifetime. Instead, it should be present in every minute and life cycle of a human being. Further, Garcia (2007) and Garcia and Lemos (2005) argue that leisure should be a time that favours creativity and the development of educated people, and only then can teenagers be skilled to live in a changing, demanding society.

Bearing in mind that nowadays society provides adolescents with a variety of choices concerning leisure, within a parent’s representation, that does not mean that they *“can do whatever they feel like”*. Within the context *“I deeply care about my children’s leisure”*, a parent states that *“I care that he spends time the best way he can”*, while another states: *“they should have moments of fun, but also moments of responsibility”*.

Family should be the place where individuals learn how to value effort and develop the notion that nothing truly impressive can be achieved without effort and that quick success does not last (Sampaio, 2006).

This institution should be a space to share ideas and develop habits of reflection and autonomy in order to allow teenagers to make choices that can offer them the highest number of possible options in terms of development (Savater, 2004a).

“Rest” and “Fun” followed the category “Development Opportunities”. These, however, were given much less value than the latter.

Some parents say that children’s leisure represents: *“time with no obligations”*, *“they have nothing to do”*, *“they get relief from the stress of school tasks and can do what they like most”*. Free time from duties provides them with a large variety of choices.

According to a parent’s representation, such time allows them *“to do what they feel like”*. Within a context where they can follow their will, a mother says that *“they should spend their time the best way they can”*, while another parent maintains that they should *“do something that gives them pleasure”*. Those states of satisfaction and joy come together as *“moments of fun”*, driving one parent to state that in that way it is possible to *“be prepared for the demands of school”*.

Savater (2004b) maintains that a human desire always exists to make his or her action understandable and the desire to be happy should be the first of all. All needs rely upon a tendency of happiness (Baudrillard, 1991). Morin (2003) shares the same point of view, stating that the individual does not live to survive, but rather survives to live, to fulfil him- or herself, establishing happiness as the fullness of his or her life.

Parents’ role in relation to adolescents’ leisure

It also seemed important to inquire about parents’ representations on the role parents should play in their children’s leisure.

The major opinion was the parents’ shaping role (Table 2). Parents are role models to follow due to their features, qualities, positions, attitudes, and the way they organize their family, being “great architects” of their children’s development and education. Thus, one parent stated, *“I think the most important aspect is that parents set good examples for their children”*, and another stated, *“parents’ habits and hobbies influence a lot”*.

This concern is so visible that it drives a parent to state that *“if the family doesn’t care, who will?”* It is this which compels parents to take certain attitudes, namely: *“to see and discuss TV programs together with my children”*, *“always warning them about the perils of some activities”*, *“to talk about the activities they like most and the ones they like least”*.

In the Social Sciences context there is a lot of evidence for the importance of parental influence on behaviours developed by adolescents, shown by the statement that *“children mirror their families”*.

Consequently, children and teenagers tend to copy many of their parents’ health habits, including the risky ones, for instance. Certain research studies maintain that there is a positive relationship between parents’ health habits (tobacco, nutrition, weight, etc.) and those of their children (McElroy, 2002).

A strong connection and communication between parents and children influence their leisure activities. Not only the parental supervision proves its importance, but also the parents’ behaviour, the home-established rules, and parents’ active participation in children’s activities (Powell & Chaloupka, 2005). As one parent said *“as long as we can, my husband and I plan weekend activities for everybody at home”*. Communication and spending time together are fundamental for developing intergenerational relationships (Bassi & Delle Fave, 2004).

These statements emphasize that parents care about their children’s leisure, they negotiate rules and set

boundaries for their children's behaviours, they seek an active involvement in their children's daily routine, and they try to develop within their children a critical sense about what leisure activities offer.

Research done by Sharp, Caldwell, Graham and Ridenour (2006) suggests that parents' educative role, as well as their monitoring and knowledge of adolescents' leisure, and in addition to helping parents ease the healthy employment of that time, may increase teenagers' interest in developing their self-regulatory ability.

Meanwhile, it is important to emphasise that the question about the need to find balance between adult control *versus* teenager control or between control and facilitation is relevant (Sharp, Caldwell, Graham & Ridenour, 2006). This question still grasps researcher's attention, as it is important to collect more data about the amount of freedom that should be given to adolescents to enable them to act upon their development as well as to gather adults' knowledge and advice to be more valuable for teenagers' development.

Family and school are strong intermediaries between teenagers and society, offering them development and socialization models. Bento (2004) maintains that no one grows up without role models. If adults do not provide role models for teenagers, teenagers will identify with alien role models proposed by others.

Therefore, parents should be ethical compasses for their children, providing not only references and values for society but also leisure contexts. Family can help to develop proper attitudes in teenagers, which may last for the rest of their lives.

The other category clearly shown, although with fewer supporters was "supporter". Some parents state that: "I agree with their options", "they should do what they want when they feel like it", "they know", "my children get together with their friends and together they choose the best for themselves".

Given the large variety of activities that teenagers have nowadays, in our study there were parents that decided to play a more passive role and give their children freedom to run their free times, placing themselves in the philosophical context of "non-structured activities" (Larson & Seepersad, 2003). These activities are carried out in a context of a spirit of freedom and pleasure, are performed spontaneously, and are outside of adults' supervision or guidance.

Aspirations that parents have about the type of activities to be developed in the leisure context

Collecting data about parents' wishes regarding the type of activity that their children should develop in

Table 1. Categories of free time representations.

Categories	Frequency
Development opportunities	54
Rest	11
Fun	9

Table 2. Categories of parent's role

Categories	Frequency
Modeling	51
Supporter	9

Table 3. Categories of parent's wishes

Categories	Frequency
Sports practice	51
Reading	20
Playing on computer/Internet	10
Learning how to play an instrument	7

their current or future free time seemed to be an important aspect of this study.

Sports was the practice that the large majority of parents valued (Table 3), thus there were many comments such as the following: "I like very much that my children practice sports" and "I would like my daughter to practice more sports".

Other contexts influenced the aforementioned parents' stands, encouraging their children to practice sports as parents feel it is a great contribution to the development of their children's character and social skills and believing that athletic performance demands are essential for preparing them for adulthood (Delle Fave & Bassi, 2003; Fletcher, Nickerson & Wright, 2003; Larson & Seepersad, 2003; McHale, Crouter & Tucker, 2001; Nishino & Larson, 2003; Raymore, Eccles & Godbey, 1999; Verma & Sharma, 2003).

According to some studies (Fernandes, Esteves, Dias, Lopes, Mendes & Azevedo, 1998; Santos Silva, Luvumba & Bandeira, 2002), sports are not widely practiced by Portuguese adolescents, thus the preference here stated by these parents seems interesting. In Europe, these youngsters present one of the lowest levels of athletic practice (Brettschneider W-D & Naul, 2004). Approximately 25% of boys and 15% of girls participate in athletic activity that meets international recommendations. Internationally, several authors (Marivoet, 2001; Meester, van Lenthe, Spittaels, Lien & Bourdeaudhuij, 2009; Sardinha, 2003) maintain that during recent years teenagers' athletic performance has been diminishing.

The main reason parents expressed for preferring sports has to do with health and well-being, since “sports is good for health”. Thus, “it is good for him to burn off energy”, “when he practices sports he is better-tempered and cheerful and speaks a lot at home...”, and “not to put on more weight”.

The reason stated by these parents about “practicing sports” should be analysed while taking into consideration the current socio-cultural context.

Lately, there are more and more medical institutions establishing a positive correlation between sports practice and health, or as one parent says, “I am always hearing our family doctor say that sports is good for health”.

However, it is important to keep in mind that although the question of causality is still open, it seems that physical activity can influence health as it encourages the embracing of other positive behaviours (Gall, Abbott-Chapman, Patton, Dwyer, & Venn, 2010; Loureiro, Matos & Diniz, 2009; Mota & Sallis, 2002).

Another emphasis regarding practicing sports is related to adults’ control, as they tend to coordinate and supervise the activities to make them effective.

Adolescents’ involvement in sports causes some parents to feel more in control and trusting. Therefore, some responded “when he is practicing, I am more rested”, which may be true “because in the club, the coach imposes rules and schedules”.

As a matter of fact, a teenager’s involvement in sports occurs in different contexts, not only within official sport, at school, in public tournaments or other private institutions but also in leisure time occupation programs or on vacation. With this in mind, one parent says that “it is a pity that during holidays training and tournaments are over”.

McElroy (2002) maintains that the reason why there are currently more athletic activities that are organised by adults for children and teenagers is because those activities provide an adult’s supervision and relative security. A few decades ago, children and teenagers could go out in the streets and play without any kind of adult supervision, even in urban and suburban areas. Nowadays many of those areas do not have adequate security for those kinds of activities.

“Reading”, although cited less than “Sports”, was another category that was valued by parents as a desired practice for their children. Along these lines, we found parents commenting that: “I would really like him to go more often to the library”, “whenever I can I try to buy him a book collection”, and “I think it is a shame that they read so little.”

Conclusions

The present study intended to identify the representations that parents have of their children’s leisure and to become familiar with their aspirations in this regard.

The results that were obtained allow us to affirm that parents connect their children’s leisure to development. In this time period, adolescents should experience a wide range of experiences guided by a set of principles so that their overall development is complete.

These parents believe that parents must provide a modelling role for their children concerning their leisure; therefore, they must develop certain features such as behaviours, attitudes and initiatives capable of influencing adolescents’ options and behaviours.

Concerning activities carried out during their children’s leisure time, sports were chosen due to health reasons as well as the fact that their practice can be carried out under adult supervision and coordination.

The leisure representations that parents have of their children set up different and complex realities according to the social, cultural, economic and familial contexts.

The purpose of this research was to contribute information to an issue that still needs more research. Parents express a concern for their adolescent’s development, they try to influence them, and they favour athletic activities.

Parents’ opinions, to an extent, lean toward structured activities. However, it is important to keep in mind that research studies do not allow us to conclude whether these are more important than non-structured activities, or vice-versa, for an adolescent’s development.

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