Images and Social Representations of Students' Identity and University Experience

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The aim of this study is to understand the beliefs of first year undergraduates towards student identity and university experience. It is based on the theory of social representations and combines the methodologies of verbal and visual forms of representations to examine the beliefs of 104 students from Brazil and France. The results show conventional and subjective ideas about being a student, objectified in images and words. The results can aid in the design of educational projects to help new students adapt to university life.

Keywords: social representations, student's identity, education, images, multi-methodology

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Every year, many young adults leave high school to pursue higher education, and they discover an unfamiliar environment that requires adaptive attitudes. It is a challenging experience that coincides with a time when other dimensions of life such as work, family and social relationships gain greater importance (Lairio, Puukari & Kouro, 2013). Students may encounter several difficulties regarding the management of financial resources and the formation of new social networks, which may interfere with their well-being and impact on their academic performances (Oliveira & Dias, 2014; Teixeira, Dias, Wottrich & Oliveira, 2008). They have also to adjust to new learning and teaching styles and to adapt to more self-directed and autonomous academic work. Therefore, this period of change can be stressful and cause drop outs and reorientation to other courses.

In the past two decades, countries across the world have developed innovative public policies to make access to higher education more inclusive and increase the number of student admissions. Brazil has been developing public policies which aim to widen participation of students from less advantaged backgrounds in higher education (Trevisol & Nierotka, 2016). In the context of the European Union there are also policies and practices in place which intend to widen access to higher education (Riddell & Weedon, 2014). Despite these policies, studies have shown that enrolment can have an even greater emotional impact on undergraduates who have no previous familial experience of higher education (Christie, Teff, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008), and for those who need to reconcile work and study (Oliveira & Dias 2014; Vargas & de Paula, 2013). Other investigations have also suggested that adaptation is even more complex for students that have not developed a sense of belonging to university (Pittman & Richmond, 2008), or have not acquired the codes, norms and habits of being an undergraduate (Coulon, 2017).

Thus, in the context of the recent phenomenon of mass enrolment at higher education in Brazil and France, of students from less advantaged backgrounds, and no previous family experience of higher education, the present study aims to look more closely at how those students make sense of their academic life, and how they construct their student identity. The results can contribute to the design of educational projects to help adaptation to new learning and social environments, in both countries.

Theoretical background

This research finds its theoretical and methodological support in the theory of social representations. For Moscovici (1961), social representations are common-sense knowledge, beliefs, and ideas about certain topics. They are constructed through social interaction and have

a conceptual and iconic aspect that words and images can both communicate (Moscovici, 2001). The primary function of social representations is to make the unknown familiar by employing two cognitive processes: anchoring and objectivation. Anchoring means to integrate new knowledge, ideas or people into a pattern of existing worldviews and categories, by naming and classifying them; and objectification means to make real a conceptual scheme or an abstract idea, by giving to it a form or an image (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999; Vala & Castro, 2013). The theory of social representations helps the understanding of how common-sense knowledge guide communication and behaviour, since they "intervene in processes as varied as the dissemination and assimilation of knowledge, individual and collective development, the definition of personal and social identities, the expression of groups, and social transformations" (Jodelet, 1989, p. 53).

The theme of student identity can be investigated through the lens of social representations, because those representations help understanding how people's views about themselves, and their role in a social group, influence behaviour. The studies of Tajfel (1970), Deschamps and Moliner (2009), have shown how social groups construct representations of themselves that play a part in their identity and in their differentiation from other groups. Breakwell (1986) has developed the Identity Process Theory to explore the links between identity process and social representations, and more precisely the relationship between social representations and 'personal representations' (Breakwell, 2001). Duveen (2001) has also looked at identity processes and observed that some types of identities are constructed when people join a certain social group and start endorsing its characteristics and associated representations. Studies on the topic of student identity and images show how social identities are embedded in culture (Silva, 2017; Gaymard, Engelmann & Tiplica, 2019). Thus, identity is socially constructed and based on the social categories people think they belong to. Moreover, the theory of social representations helps to understand the differences between social groups in the construction of representations, because the way their members use categories as references for making sense of the new depends on how they see themselves in the social structure (Duveen, 2001, 2007; Vala & Castro, 2013). Following these lines of thought, it is possible that students' identities contain elements that show the integration of the norms, codes and associated representations of being a member of a higher education institution, as well as elements that reflect individual's life conditions and experiences. This study can contribute to the understanding of the elements that take part in identity construction which can have an impact on a student adapting to higher education.

Methodological discussions in social representations

Some studies have contributed to methodological discussions on how to access and analyse shared knowledge about certain topics and perceptions of the world, including Abric (1994), Flament and Rouquette (2003) and Piermattéo, Tavani and Lo Monaco (2018), to name but a few. They show that words and expressions extracted from transcripts of interviews, word associations and questionnaires express beliefs, perceptions and lay knowledge about the world and hence are useful to studies in social representations. Abric (2001) demonstrates that a representation has a structure with a central nucleus and periphery. The central nucleus describes the representation and has the most consensual and stable element, "the one that ensures the perennial nature of the representation in moving and evolving contexts" (Abric, 2001, p. 44). In the periphery, one can see the elements that complement the central nucleus. They refer to the context of the representation and are known to be more flexible, to express individualities and to contain contradictions. They are "the moving and evolving aspect integrating the changes of the context (Abric, 2001, p. 44).

Other investigations explored different ways of studying social representations. They have focused on the symbolic power of images and on their role in communicating social representations (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008; Cohen & Moliner, 2017, 2018; De Rosa, 2014; De Rosa & Farr, 2001; Howarth, 2006; Jodelet, 1989; Moliner, 1996; Silva, 2011, 2015). These studies explore the idea that images can convey common sense knowledge and beliefs and can express them in a way that people can immediately understand. Firstly, one can easily associate an image with their referent because of their degree of likeness, and secondly because people have acquired a code system to interpret and give meaning to images (Cohen & Moliner, 2018). As Moliner (1996) has pointed out, an image is a set of characteristics and properties attributed to an object, which depends on the information individuals have about it.

Other studies show that a combination of different data sources and methods can facilitate access to a wider range of viewpoints (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999; Flick, 2018; Gaymard & Cazenave, 2018; Gaymard et al., 2019; Silva, 2013, 2015). It has also been observed that verbal techniques could favour the expression of rational and socially acceptable opinions about the topic, while the produced images could allow the communication of the emotional aspects as well as the collective memories (De Rosa, 2014). Thus, a combined methodological approach to investigations, with different techniques, could offer the means of accessing consensual and emotional elements of representations.

The aim of this study is to understand the beliefs of first year undergraduates towards student identity and university experience. Participants will be encouraged to reflect on their

identities, university experiences and lifestyles, and to express them through words and drawings.

METHOD

Inspired by these investigations, we developed a multi-methodological approach to research, that combines both verbal and visual forms of representations and compares students from different countries. We think that this approach can facilitate the observation of a wider variety of outlooks, opinions and representations and help the identification of the categories that serve as references to make sense of academic life and student identity. This technique was applied to first-year undergraduates from Brazil and France. This study poses the following questions: What do first year undergraduates think about their academic life? What do they think about being a university student? Do students from different socio-cultural backgrounds have distinct ways to represent these topics?

Participants

Two groups of female undergraduates participated in this study: 52 from Brazil and 52 from France. We selected only female students because we did not gather a significant sample size of male students in both countries. An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the age mean in the two student groups. There was no significant difference between the Brazilian participants (M=18.31, SD=0.94) and the French participants (M=18.07, SD=0.74); t (96.5) =1.4, p=0.16. Cohen's size value (d=0.27) suggested a small effect. The Brazilian participants are enrolled in the first year of their university course. They study at a Federal University in the south region of the country and are attending an evening course in teacher training. All the 52 students attending this course come from low-medium income communities. They are originally from the southern region of Brazil and have just graduated from local state secondary schools. Most of these students work part-time and their daily routines combine work and study. They entered the university course through affirmative actions and access policies. The Program to Support Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities was launched with the aim to increase the participation rates of under-represented groups of students in state universities. The French participants study at a university institute of technology in the south of France in a professional sales course and they have just graduated from high school. They are originally from the southern region of France and come from medium income communities. The French students are the first ones that were accepted at the University through the *Parcoursup* online application, which was launched in 2018 by the French government to end

up with the draw system of application. Although Brazilian and French undergraduates attend different courses at university, teaching environments are similar. Their classrooms are small, with 52 students, which allows closer contact with peers and teachers. They have daily lectures, with one teacher per classroom, and spend and an average of 5 hours each day at their institutions. Most students are the first members of their families to attend higher education.

Materials and procedure

This paper reports on a multi-methodological study, that combined verbal and visual instruments of data collection. In the first section of the research, participants were asked to answer questions about their expectations of the course, and about the factors that would contribute to their graduation. In the second section, the participants were asked to spontaneously evoke and write down the first four words that came to mind after hearing the terms 'to be a student' and 'to study'. These prompts focus on the specific theme of student identity, to identify the internal organization of the representations and to look at how the elements are associated. The experimenters emphasized the spontaneous nature of the task and that the words should be written down as quickly as possible. Most students complied with the instructions and the word association did not last more than two minutes for each inductive term. In the third section, the participants were asked to produce a drawing that represents what it is to be a student by drawing the student's posture. The word posture can mean, both in Portuguese and in French, the position in which the body holds itself, a conscious state, and an outward behavioural attitude. We are looking at how student identity is objectified in images because some of the elements that compose identity can be expressed by images of the body (Silva, 2015). The instrument was applied while undergraduates were in their classrooms and it took an average of 30 to 45 minutes to complete. The open-ended questions intended to provoke reflections about the university course in general and should not impact on the content of the word association, which focused on the theme of student identity.

The answers to the questions on expectation and motivation were treated by the content analysis proposed by Bardin (1977). They were coded and classified in categories and subcategories according to their thematic character, and a table shows their frequency of occurrence in both groups of participants. The most frequent categories are thought to reflect the shared ideas about the topics under discussion, and therefore express the social representations.

The words evoked during the free association were analysed by the software Evoc 2000 (*Ensemble de Programmes Permettant l'Analyse des Evocations*). This analytical procedure is

in line with the studies of Vergès (1992) and consists of crossing the observed frequency of words produced with their order of evocation. This software produces a table that shows the structural organization of representations and the hierarchical order of its elements. In the first quadrant of the table one finds the elements that possibly describe the representation. Since they have high frequency and are promptly evoked, they may be expressing the collective memory and may be an indicator of the central nucleus of the representation. In the other quadrants, one finds the words with high frequency, but low order of evocation, and the ones with low frequency and high order of evocation (first periphery). They possibly show the elements that are more associated to the concrete life conditions of individuals, and more likely to change. The elements of the second periphery (low frequency and low order of evocation) are not determinative of the meaning of the representation (Gaymard & Bordarie, 2015).

The analysis of the drawings had two phases. In the first one, a content analysis (Bardin, 1977) was carried out, in which the drawings were coded and classified into three categories: time, space and body. In the second phase, a holistic exploration was undertaken to consider the iconographic and symbolic meanings of these categories. This analytical procedure is in line with the studies of Silva (2015) and Cohen and Moliner (2017, 2018).

The time category was based on the studies of Dubar (2004) and Zimbardo, Keough and Boyd (1997) on the psychological aspect of time. After an initial exploration of the drawings, it was observed that time was expressed in two different ways: a. present and b. timeline. The present time category shows everyday activities and routines. The timeline category refers to the present and the near future within the same drawing.

The category space was based on studies on how individuals represent and signify their daily spaces, and on how social representations are embedded in spatial and mobility contexts (De Alba, 2011; Félonneau, Marchand & Fleury-Bahi, 2005; Gaymard & Bordarie, 2015; Jodelet & Milgram, 1976; Silva, 2015). An initial analysis indicated a different number of spaces within each drawing: a. single space, b. double spaces, and c. multiple spaces.

The analysis of the body was based on the studies of Jodelet (2006), Silva (2011, 2015) and Santos & Silva (2017), for whom the image of the body can depict social norms of conduct, stand as symbols of groups and cultures, and objectify social representations. A random examination of the drawings showed two main body positions and generated four categories: a. scholarly body positions (sitting down), b. non-scholarly body positions (standing up), c. mixed body positions (both sitting and standing up positions) and d. absent body (only line drawings). The drawings were also analysed according to the facial expressions of the figure:

a. happy, b. neutral or c. unhappy. This classification was based on the studies of Knapp and Hall (1999) on how the face expresses emotions.

RESULTS

Questions on expectation and motivation

After an examination of the answers to the question of what to expect from the university, four categories were found: academic formation; social life; professional perspective; personal development (Table 1).

Table 1.
Categories: expectation and motivation - Brazilian (BR) and French (FR) students

		Academic formation	Social life	Professional perspective	Personal development	Various
Expectation	BR	47 (43,5%)	4 (3,7%)	23 (21,3%)	34 (31,5%)	_
	FR	40 (40%)	5 (5%)	46 (46%)	9 (9 %)	_
Motivation	BR	22 (27,5%)	11 (13,7%)	23 (28,5%)	18 (22,5%)	6 (7,5%)
	FR	11 (11%)	6 (6%)	62 (62%)	18 (3%)	3 (3%)

There is a significant difference between Brazilian and French students concerning what to expect from university ($\chi^2(3) = 22.60$, $p<.001$). The category 'academic formation' combines answers such as: 'I expect to graduate' (BR) and 'To educate me' (FR). The category 'social life' integrates answers such as: 'To have more friends' (BR) and 'To meet new people' (FR). Both groups of participants scored equally in these two categories by frequently indicating that they mainly want to graduate and that they associate very little social life with academic life. The difference between them is more accentuated when we compare the categories 'professional perspective' and 'personal development'. The Brazilian respondents seem to expect a personal development more frequently than a professional outcome: "To grow as a person" (BR), "a bridge to new challenges and growth" (BR). The French respondents, on the other hand, emphasized the professional aspect over the personal development. The category 'professional perspective' integrates answers such as: 'To find a suitable work' (FR), 'to find a good job, well remunerated' (FR).

The answers to the question about what motivated the student to continue in the course were analysed and classified in the same categories. The difference between the groups was also significant ($\chi^2(4) = 22.08$, $p<.001$). The Brazilian participants are motivated, almost equally, by the professional prospects, academic formation and personal development: 'have a better job', 'getting a diploma' and 'discovering new things'. For the French participants, the professional perspective is the main source of motivation, followed by the personal development: 'a flourishing job' and 'having a great future life'. Social life and friendship networks were the least mentioned motivating sources in both groups. This is an interesting finding because peer interaction is seen as positively associated with adaptation to university (Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Teixeira et al., 2008).

Word association

Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5 show the actual words evoked for the terms 'to be a student' and 'to study' and their frequencies. The mean rank of appearance of words was selected to be 2.5, following the default value of the Evoc 2000. The words with a frequency level equal to or higher than 10 were considered the most frequent. They correspond to almost 20% of the subjects from each sample.

Table 2.
Free association: to be a student – Brazilian participants (software Evoc – mean rank of appearance and frequencies).

			Frequencies (absolute values)	First rank ‹2.5		Frequencies (absolute values)	Last rank ›=2.5
		Central words			**First periphery**		
Frequency	High ›=11	To study	23	2.400	-	-	-
		Challenge	11	2.182	-	-	-
		First periphery			**Second periphery**		
	Low	Dedication	10	2.400	Future	8	2.750
		To read	9	2.444	To learn	7	2.857
		Responsibility	8	1.750	Effort	5	2.800
					Graduation	5	3.200

Note. Number of words = 205; number of different words = 91; 44.39%

For the Brazilian participants (Table 2), 'to study' was the most frequent word and the one more promptly evoked. Together with the word 'challenge' it may constitute the central nucleus of this representation and indicate a common-sense knowledge about this identity. Both words express what is expected from a student and the difficulties and challenges they face. This result corresponds to the findings of Christie et al. (2008) about the challenges faced by those entering university. The word 'dedication', the verb 'to read', and the word 'responsibility' supplement what may be the central nucleus of the representation, and suggest that, in order to be successful, a great mental or physical effort is needed. For a small number of subjects, being a university student is associated with a future prospect. The words 'future' and 'graduation' stand for this sense of aim and achievement. The low percentage of different words may indicate the existence of common ideas about being a student in this group.

Table 3.
Free association: to be a student – French participants (software Evoc – mean rank of appearance and frequencies).

			Frequencies (absolute values)	First rank ‹2.5		Frequencies (absolute values)	Last rank ›=2.5
Frequency		**Central words**			**First periphery**		
	High ›=10	Intellectual work	27	1.889	Autonomy	14	2.643
		Going out	21	2.476	Friends	10	2.500
		First periphery			**Second periphery**		
	Low	Studies	6	2.167	Freedom	6	2.667
		Responsibility	6	2.200			

Note. Number of words = 199; number of different words = 80; 40.20%

For the French participants (Table 3), student identity seems to be formed by two frequently and promptly evoked words: 'intellectual work' and 'going out'. In the first periphery, the word 'friends' complements 'going out' and indicates that group membership is also associated with the academic lifestyle. This result corresponds to the studies of Erlish (1998; 2006) who pointed out that undergraduates' lives are also characterised by processes of socialization and emancipation. The words 'studies' and 'responsibility' complement the idea of a work in progress and indicate a sense of accountability and self-command. In addition to

that, the term 'freedom' emphasizes the emancipation status of undergraduates, and complements the term 'autonomy', in the first periphery. The percentage of different words was 40.20%. This may indicate the existence of some common ideas about the topic in this group.

Table 4.
Free association: inductive term 'to study' – Brazilian participants (Software Evoc – mean rank and frequencies).

			Frequencies (absolute values)	First rank ‹2.5		Frequencies (absolute values)	Last rank ›=2.5
Frequency		**Central words**			**First periphery**		
	High ›=10	To learn	14	2.214	Dedication	11	2.636
		Knowledge	13	2.308			
		To read	12	1.583			
		First periphery			**Second periphery**		
	Low	Effort	9	2.444	-	-	-
		Time	9	2.000			

Note. Number of words = 208; number of different words = 98; 47.11%

The results of the free association test for the inductive term 'to study' for the Brazilian subjects can be seen in Table 4. This representation may be formed by the idea of learning, because the verbs 'to learn', 'to read' and the word 'knowledge' were the most frequently and promptly evoked. Supporting this representation, we have the idea that to study requires commitment expressed by the words, 'dedication', 'effort' and 'time', in the first periphery. The word 'time' may be referring to the difficulties encountered by these students in combining work and study. The percentage of different words was 47.11%, which may indicate that the group has common ideas about the topic under investigation.

For the French participants (Table 5), the term 'to study' is frequently and promptly associated with learning and intellectual work, which indicates that they may compose the central nucleus of this representation. This result is similar to the ones obtained with the Brazilian participants. In the first periphery, the words 'concentration', 'exams' and 'library' complete this meaning, adding a location at the university where students also study. Although the terms in the second periphery have little weight in the interpretation of this representation, there seems to be an association between study and fatigue, expressed by words 'stress' and

'tired'. The percentage of different words was lower than 50%, indicating the prevalence of common views about the term.

Table 5.
Free association: inductive term 'to study' – French participants (Software Evoc – mean rank and frequencies).

			Frequencies (absolute values)	First rank ‹2.5		Frequencies (absolute values)	Last rank ›=2.5
		Central words			**First periphery**		
Frequency	High ›=10	To learn	20	2.210	-	-	-
		Intellectual work	13	2.333	-	-	-
		First periphery			**Second periphery**		
	Low	Concentration	7	1.435	Difficulty	8	2.500
		Exams	6	2.444	Tired	6	2.667
		Library	5	1.750	Stress	6	2.500

Note. Number of words = 182; number of different words = 81; 44.50%

The drawings

The drawings representing the students' image were classified into categories and subcategories: a. time (present, timeline), b. space (single, double and multiple), and c. body (scholarly, non-scholarly, mixed, and absent body). Table 6 shows the distributions of these drawings (n=104) in categories, and figures 1 and 2 show examples of how they were classified.
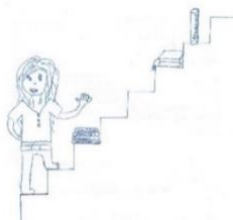
Table 6.
Categories and subcategories of drawings of Brazilian (BR) and French (FR) participants

	Time		Space			Body			
	present	timeline	single	double	multi	scholar	Non-scholar	mixed	absent
BR	26	26	34	10	8	8	34	2	8
FR	45	7	33	9	10	30	18	4	0

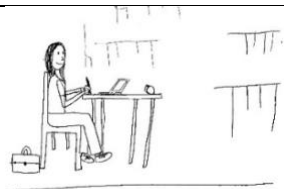a. present time, single space, scholarly body   b. timeline, single space, non-scholarly body

c. timeline, double space, non-scholarly body   d. present time, multiple spaces, mixed body

Figure 1. Selection of drawings and examples of how they were classified (Brazil).

a. present time, single space, scholarly body   b. timeline, multiple spaces, non-scholarly body

c. present, multiple space, scholarly body   d. present time, multiple spaces, non-scholarly

body

Figure 2. Selection of drawings and examples of how they were classified (France).

The analysis of the category time shows that some drawings depict everyday routines, lectures and study sessions at home and at classroom (Figure 1, a. and d.; Figure 2, a., c. and d.), bus journeys and parties, classified in subcategory 'present'. The subcategory 'timeline' contains sequences of events from the present to the near future, with drawings of graduation ceremonies, and diplomas; some drawn inside speech bubbles (Figure 1, b. and c.). The Brazilians depicted with equal frequency the present time and the timeline. In the present subcategory they showed concerns around the distribution of time between work and university. In the timeline subcategory, life context and expectations for the future were both present. The French students mainly represented the present time, with scenes of study sessions and social interactions with friends and peers.

The analysis of the category space shows that the two groups of participants preferred to depict a single space (Figure 1. a. and c.; Figure 2. a. and c.). The double and multiple spaces displayed scenes of home, work, university, and bus stops (Figure 1. d.; Figure 2. b. c. and d.). The groups differed in the type of location depicted. In the Brazilian group, 40% of the drawings showed the student at the library or in the classroom, and 40% depicted scenes outside the university, such as regular journeys from home to work and from work to university. The remaining drawings represented the students in less specific locations. In the French group, 63% of the drawings showed the students at the university, the library, or in a classroom, and the remaining drawings depicted locations outside of the university building.

The analysis of the drawings of the human figure showed that the most frequent type of drawing among the Brazilians was the non-scholarly position (Figure 1 b. and c.). These were images of people standing up, involved in some sort of activity or work, commuting from home to university or moving from one stage to the next in life. The most common representation of the French participants was the scholarly position (Figure 2 a. and c.), with students sitting down, in classroom or library.

A closer analysis of the facial expressions of the figures shows that being a student was more frequently associated with a positive emotion by the French participants (59.5%) than by the Brazilians (51.9%). The neutral face was more common amongst the Brazilians (21.2%) than the French (13.5%). Both groups presented similar results for the unhappy face: 26.9, for the Brazilians and 27% for the French.

DISCUSSION

According to Duveen (2007), people can use some elements from a wider collection of their cultural resources to construct social representations. Thus, when analysing these

representations one "will always refer back in some way to the cultural context in which they take shape" (Duveen, 2007, p. 454). Since being an undergraduate is a novel experience for most first-year students, they may construct their identities by taking as references elements from what is known and valued about being at higher education. These representations can be expressed in a variety of ways, and different methodological techniques can provide the means for gathering consensual viewpoints, and more emotional aspects about the topic under investigation.

The open-ended questions identified important categories of thought that expressed consensual and more rational views about expectations and motivations regarding higher education. Students from both groups expected an academic formation but diverged in their professional perspective. The French students expected a professional future more often than the Brazilians. Since the French study at university in a professional sales course, they may be more likely to look forward to a career outcome from their graduation. Thus, their vocational path may have had an impact on their representations. The Brazilian students, on the other hand, refer to different categories to make sense of their academic life: personal growth, academic formation, and professional development. They may be expressing foremost a desire to graduate, since they are the first members of their families to enter university. That is, no previous family experience of higher education may have been a reference for their representation.

The word association technique helped us identify the structure of the representation and to highlight the common-sense knowledge about being an undergraduate. For the Brazilians, to be engaged in studying activities, to read, to learn and to be dedicated, probably reflect culturally shared views about what it is to be an undergraduate and what is expected from them. For the French, to study, to develop, to make friends and to be autonomous, possibly correspond to their cultural shared views about this identity. The key difference between these two groups is regarding references to social interactions and friendship network. Studies have shown that some identities can be constructed when people join a social group and start sustaining its associated representations (Duveen, 2001). Thus, identity is embedded in culture and social backgrounds (Gaymard et al., 2019; Silva, 2013). It is possible that social interactions and friendship networks are not representative of, or associated with, being an undergraduate in the Brazilian group as much as it is in the French. This is an interesting result and a topic that deserves to be further investigated. Since adaptation to higher education has been associated with the quality of social interactions (Oliveira & Dias, 2014; Pittman &

Richmond, 2008; Teixeira et al., 2008), it would be interesting to see how peer interaction impacts on university adaptation in the Brazilian group.

The drawing technique objectified common views and the emotional aspects of representations. The depictions of the bodies in different postures, with distinct facial expressions and in varied locations expressed how student identity was performed and how the social context impacted on representations. The Brazilians associated student identity with the varied dimensions of life, objectified in images of multitasking activities and responsibilities classified in the categories space, time and body positions. Personal aspirations were also present, indicating that university experience and student identity are anchored in the desire to graduate and to develop. There were few references to social interactions between peers for study and leisure purposes. Possibly, the use of information and communication technologies changed the dynamics of studying habits, and physical gatherings have decreased in favour of virtual ones. This explanation is supported by the studies of Paivandi and Espinosa (2013), and Walder (2016). However, peer interaction was not present in the word association either, which may reinforce the idea that group membership is less associated with student life and undergraduate identity in the Brazilian group. There were few depictions of libraries and other university rooms in their drawings. Possibly, part-time work may affect the use of these facilities, and reduce their representations as living spaces. Since social representations are embedded in spatial contexts (De Alba, 2011; Félonneau, Marchand & Fleury-Bahi, 2005; Gaymard & Bordarie, 2015; Jodelet & Milgram, 1976; Silva, 2015), the absence of some common living spaces in the drawings may indicate a variety of spatial references in the construction of this identity. The emotional aspects were evident in the depictions of the faces, showing a mixture of being happy and not completely satisfied with academic life. All together, these results may indicate a multifaceted representation of identity, objectified by the desire to graduate, the need to balance work and university commitments, the potentially difficult study conditions, and their ongoing lives outside of the university context.

The drawings of the French students were mainly related to the faculty context and to friendship networks. Depictions of space, time and body images objectified conventional representations of academic life, with images of classrooms, libraries and students sitting down. There were also representations of students in social interactions outside of the university context, which may indicate that student identity is formed through both studying and socializing. This was objectified by drawings of academic context and is anchored in the students' desire both to advance their career prospects, and to be part of a social group. This result corresponds to data obtained in the free association technique. The emotional aspects

were also evident in the depictions of the faces, that show a satisfaction with the course. This result may indicate a cohesive representation of identity and academic life in the French group, with fewer references to life outside university. When other contexts were depicted, outside the university, they made references to social life.

Limitations

If the differences found between the countries are limited to our sample, this analysis offers a variety of information that could foster future studies and encourage cross-cultural comparisons within the theory of social representations. It would be interesting to develop further studies in which variables such as gender and type of course were associated to undergraduates' identities in each country, or to compare students at different stages of their courses.

CONCLUSIONS

This study broadens our knowledge of how first-year undergraduates experience higher education. The combination of data sources and methods facilitated access to a wider range of viewpoints, as suggested by Bauer & Gaskell (1999), Flick (2018), Gaymard & Cazenave (2018), Gaymard et al., (2019) and by Silva (2015). Since social representations have a conceptual and iconic aspect (Gaymard & Cazenave, 2018; Moscovici, 2001), the combination of methods allowed us to identify potential elements of social representations of academic life and identity. The results show that students' images of themselves are marked by the social context where they live, what is in accordance with the studies of Duveen (2001), Gaymard et al., (2019) and Silva (2013). Since identity was, in many instances, associated with adjustments to different life situations outside the education context and expressed the values of other dimensions of life we propose that intervention projects should be developed to help all these students to explore university life in full. Programs to enhance social interactions and friendship networks among peers could improve their sense of group membership, ease feelings of stress and anxiety, and facilitate adaptation to higher education. Such programs can be particularly helpful for those who have no previous familial experience of higher education, and for those who need to work and study. Together with conventional classroom lectures, virtual platforms of interaction could also facilitate communication among peers for study and social purposes. Projects that can better integrate higher education and work, by assisting internships programs, for instance, could help students to reconcile their concept of graduation with future work activity. These measures would most probably have a positive impact on the learning outcomes of disadvantaged groups of students. Since groups differ regarding peer

network and social interactions, it would be interesting to develop a future line of research to observe how communication and information technologies are being used to mediate social contacts among peers and to assist undergraduates during their study activities.

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