

Hegemonic, Emancipated and Polemic Social Representations: Parental Dialogue Regarding Israeli Naval Commandos Training in Polluted Water

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This study examines how a *dialog* functions when new information constituting *emancipated social representations* and involving external threat, undermines the confidence of parents of reserve naval commandos in their *hegemonic representations*. They get together as a group and through joint dialogue co-construct *polemic representations* from the former hegemonic and emancipated ones. This chain of events followed news regarding high incidence of cancer and other virulent diseases in soldiers who during their military service trained in the waters of a river contaminated with hazardous petrochemicals. This news was incompatible with the hegemonic representations that acknowledge the existence of an underlying contract with the state, according to which the state undertakes parental responsibility for soldiers' well being. A group of parents of elite naval commandos, whose previous representations were shaken, got together to take action. Through the *communication among parents* the new emancipated and the former hegemonic representations were constructed into polemic ones, which also enabled them to construct also new action scenarios for fighting against the authorities. Their aim was to get the state to acknowledge its responsibility for the health of the soldiers who fell ill. Consequently, the parents were able to re-adopt previous hegemonic representations that enabled them to resume their lives as civilians who have faith in the traditional contract between the individual and the state.

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Introduction

In June 2000, an investigative report was published in the Israeli press revealing a possible correlation between dives carried out by Israeli naval commandos as part of their training in the contaminated estuary of the Kishon River, and the cancer that many of the soldiers contracted (Tal-Shir, Yechezkeli, 2000). The naval commando unit, called the “Shayetet”, is an elite military unit and admittance is conditional on a meticulous selection process according to particularly rigorous criteria of physical fitness and mental strength. Following publication of the investigative report and information indicating a greater number of sick soldiers than stated in the initial report, it was alleged that the cancer and other diseases contracted by the soldiers was caused by their contact with petrochemical materials while training in the waters of the Kishon. Beyond the personal and human aspects of the suffering endured both by the soldiers who fell ill and the families of soldiers who died of cancer, serious questions were raised in the public arena regarding the military and its judiciousness, and especially its responsibility and reliability with regards to safeguarding the lives of the soldiers. The data that began accumulating indicated that despite the severe danger, the army did not acknowledge the causal connection between the diving and the morbid results, and also had failed to take any action to actively safeguard new soldiers from the high risks of training and diving in these waters. Following a public outcry, the then Minister of Defense decided to appoint a commission of inquiry to investigate the causal connection between the dives in the Kishon and the high incidence of cancer among soldiers who trained in its waters. A highly respected retired Supreme Court Judge headed the commission.

In Israel, military service is mandatory for all civilians between the ages of 18-21. Many of the soldiers are conscripted into combat units and undergo rigorous training and prolonged periods of absence from their parents’ homes. The traditional role of parents during their children’s military service is to provide moral and physical support. Various activities such as the soldiers’ “Saturday laundry” (weekend laundering and ironing of uniforms), “care packages” sent to the army base, and family visits to army bases on weekends when the soldier is restricted to base, have become traditions and social “rituals” in Israel. Saturday visits have become established as a semi-formal paradigm in which the soldiers’ parents and the army are involved in a complex relationship of material and emotional dependency (Katriel, 1999). These activities, although carried out by many households, are personal and individual in nature, with no joint organization of families.

Parents of soldiers who served in the naval commandos, the “Shayetet”, were similar in many respects to those of other soldiers’ parents.² However, unlike other parents, they were not permitted to visit their children at their army base (with one exception, to attend a formal ceremony upon completion of a prolonged training course). The uniqueness of this group of parents was manifested in their absolute acceptance of and commitment to *silence and secrecy*, which was conveyed by their children as an unconditional and uncompromising message. In many respects, the unit was perceived as an extension of home and family, thus enabling the parents to adhere to a “know-nothing” attitude regarding their children’s activities in the army, their training and the risks they were exposed to. This “know-nothing”

² The information regarding the unit of the naval commandos is based on personal knowledge of the author as a wife and a mother to navy soldiers, and on information from the research group parents.

attitude existed as part of the parents' absolute faith in the contract of trust with the army and in its responsibility for the welfare, health and safety of their "children".

The organization of a group of parents (aged 55-70) of adult children (aged 25-40), who in their regular military service had served in naval commando units, is an unusual occurrence among soldiers' parents in general, and is all the more remarkable in view of the kind of detached involvement of this particular group. Very few such organizations of soldiers' parents have been previously documented (for example the "Four Mothers Movement" at the end of the 1990s that called for the withdrawal of Israeli soldiers from Lebanon). However, never before had a group of parents of naval commandos, or parents of adults who had completed their military service, come together to take action. The organization of this unique group of parents raises several questions.

In the present paper I would like to address the questions of what led people with adult children, who are independent and have families of their own, to resume their traditional parental role of being committed first and foremost to safeguarding their children's health and physical well-being? How did the small parents group of "silence breakers" organize themselves in spite of the strong opposition articulated by their children, who felt a deep traditional loyalty to their military unit and viewed the sacred code of silence as a supreme value? The present study follows the organization of the parents group of "silence breakers", and tries to examine how the dialog between members of this group illuminates the process they go through. The dialog between the parents was examined from the theoretical perspective of Social Representations Theory.

Examining the case from the perspective of Social Representations Theory

The term "social representations", which was coined by Moscovici (1961, 1976, 1993a), followed by a large group of other researchers (e.g., Doise, 1990, 1993; Farr, 1990; Wagner, 1995), assumes the existence of a system of symbolic representations shared both by individuals and society and constitutes the foundation on which the individual builds the perception of one's self as part of a group. The representations are constructed through a dynamic process of communication within the group and their function is to enable members of a group to function in a familiar and "self-evident" world. Shared representations constitute the basis for communication and the ability to function as a social body with shared ideological codes, a sense of identity and social coherence. Social representations serve the dual purpose of making the unfamiliar familiar, and constructing a group identity.

The history of the group of parents described above can be examined from the perspective of the three types of representations defined by Moscovici (1988):

Hegemonic Representations are shared to some extent by all members of a society and signify the societal identity, allowing very few degrees of freedom on the individual level. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is an instance of this kind of representation. It is not only considered a civic duty, but also a national Zionist narrative. The elite units, whose soldiers dove in the Kishon River, are identified with the very essence of this narrative as its "holy of holies", in which the individual serves the collective Zionist ideology, in "exchange" for society's highest regard and recognition. The explicit "contract" between state and soldier is exemplified in the formal publication of the "Telling of Independence Day" (2002) and specifies that in the course of their military service soldiers follow orders as required, to the extent of risking their personal safety and their lives. In return, the state, by means of the Ministry of Defense, guarantees full care for them and their families in case of injury in the line of duty. Faith in the army is at the core of this contract between soldier and state, and subsequently between parents and commanding officers, who are committed by this contract

to safeguard the welfare of their children. The military unit was perceived as a home and family, thus enabling the parents to adhere to a “know-nothing” attitude of their children’s activities in the army, their training and the risks they are exposed to. These “know-nothing” hegemonic representations existed with the parents’ absolute faith in the contract of trust with the army and its responsibility for the welfare, health and safety of their “children”.

Emancipated Representations are distinctively constructed information by small sections of a society, which are not yet incompatible with the hegemonic representations. These representations are constructed when members of a society are differentially exposed to new information and consequently reflect differences between individuals or sub-groups within a broad identity group. The information regarding the polluted Kishon was initially constructed without connection to the hegemonic representation of the underlying state-parents contract and was differentially entertained by individual parents and authority figures such as military physicians and health officers. However, shortly afterwards it became apparent that the army was still conducting some of its training exercises in the Kishon, ignoring information regarding the health hazards of diving in its waters (testimonies from Shamgar, Vilchik, Renart, 2001). This information was constructed by a number of involved people, including parents, as clashing with the hegemonic notion of absolute faith in the contract of trust with the army and its responsibility for their “children”.

Polemic Representations are formed by subgroups in the course of a dispute or social conflict when society as a whole or the social authorities do not necessarily share them. They express rivalry or incongruity between representations. Public and parental acknowledgement of the army’s refusal to take responsibility for the welfare of soldiers became a lever for transforming the emancipated representations regarding the polluted Kishon into polemic ones. Consequently, following public demand, a commission was appointed to investigate the causal connection between dives in the Kishon and the high incidence of casualties. Information regarding the work of the Commission became a permanent feature in the daily press and in television and radio news broadcasts. The media followed the Commission’s discussions, highlighting new information regarding the high incidence of cancer among the soldiers (including distressing personal stories). The press reports underscored the suppression (“we do not recall”, “we do not remember”) by past and present military commanders, the rejection of claims regarding the military’s responsibility for selecting the polluted river as a training site, and the overt and covert threats to soldiers of the unit lest they testify and cooperate with the Commission. The families of the soldiers were quite naturally more alert than others to this information and followed it with increasing anxiety.

Social changes occur when emancipated representations evolve into polemic representations that render the “self-evident” existence of hegemonic representations impossible, at least for some members of the group, and call for innovation and change. For parents in Israel, the hegemonic representations were the “parental responsibility” which is transferred to military commanders when their children join the army. The “Kishon Affair” challenged these hegemonic representations and led to a situation in which the polemical representations of the parents who resumed the primal role of safeguarding their “children” came into direct conflict with their hegemonic representations. This expected social change, however, was avoided in the present case. In March 2003, the Commission of Inquiry completed its work and acknowledged the responsibility of the state to care for the sick soldiers and for families of the soldiers who had died. The parents, at this point, preferred to return to the hegemonic representations of the army as a foster parent, which are shared by Israeli society as a whole.

The conflictory encounter between social representations of social identities

Why did the parents group of “silence breakers” resume their parental identity? And how did this identity serve them in achieving their polemic fight? From the perspective of social representations, social identity is a function of the representations themselves. An individual’s identities are constructed externally by means of the identification society bestows upon a person (Duveen, 2001), and constitute an answer to the question of “who am I in the eyes of others”. People are members of more than one group, and are therefore multiply identified. Affiliation to a group is manifested by acceptance and preservation of the group’s hegemonic representations. The identity structure of individuals who experience their various group identities as having a high degree of overlap is relatively simple and membership in the different groups combines into one intra-group identity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). However, in situations where individuals sense incongruity between the different groups, their identity becomes more complex. Incompatibility between identities is problematic, and may be solved by hierarchical choice. Once the incompatibility is resolved, the initial organization may be resumed. In this situation, a subgroup is able to return to the hegemonic representations and accept them once again.

Like other Israeli parents, the parents of the naval commandos probably hold several social identities simultaneously, among them Israeli and parental. Each of these identities is typically manifested in different places and times in an individual’s everyday life, thus allowing the identities to exist concurrently without any sense of incongruence, and enabling the individual to maintain the hegemonic representations that are accepted by members of different groups as part of being Israeli citizens. In our case a problem arose with the emergence of the emancipated representations, which resulted in conflicting identity representations between the hegemonic representations of having faith in the army and the parental identity concerning responsibility for one’s children.

In the following study, I wish to present the internal discourse of a group of parents of former naval commandos who got together in order to fight against the refusal of the Israeli military authorities to take full responsibility for their children’s well being.

Methodology

The research was conducted between early August 2000, when the Commission of Inquiry began its sessions, and July 2001, when its first report was published. The research structure required the simultaneous development of a preliminary procedure and schedule, while maintaining sensitivity to the situation and modifying and adapting the research structure according to the flow of information. The research was based on a naturalist paradigm (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Selection of the research tools, their quantity and implementation, as well as the precise selection of subjects and the mode of contact with them, were determined on-site and occasionally in the course of the research itself. This is an ethnographic study in which the researcher was actively present as events unfolded and developed: attending the Commission of Inquiry hearings, parent meetings, meetings of a representative parent committee, and meetings between parents and Members of Knesset (Israel’s parliament). Contact was initially established by chance with two parents of healthy reserve soldiers who were present at the Commission’s hearings. The two parents, who formed the leadership of the parents group in the course of the process, allowed the researcher to follow the process of the group’s organization from start to finish and to attend all the group’s meetings (with the exception of a meeting between representatives of the group and the judge who chaired the Commission). All the meetings were recorded and fully

transcribed. The Commission's official proceedings were placed at the researcher's disposal (with the exception of minor sections that were deleted by the military censorship). There was a vast amount of evidence heard in the Commission's nineteen sessions, some of which does not directly touch upon the parents group. However, these testimonies influenced the development of the public debate on the issue in general, and the dialog within the parents group in particular. In the course of the study, testimonies were also gathered from the parents group of "silence keepers", who chose to maintain the previously accepted tradition of silence rather than take action through group organization. These testimonies are not included in the present paper. Qualitative methods from the constructivist school, which studies social processes through the dialog conducted between group members, were used to examine the material. This approach accords a central position to the information at the disposal of the group members and its affinity to the social reality at large (Sabar, 2001).

Case Study: Social Representations in Action

Just four months after exposure of the possible correlation between health risks and dives in the waters of the Kishon, a group of parents of naval commandos organized themselves into an action group. The initial subjects and the major topics of discussion between the parents dealt with anxiety for their sons (referred to as "children" by the parents group). Deep concerns and anxiety for the sons are not new or unfamiliar to parents of elite combat unit soldiers and had been part of their lives since their children's first day in the army. The threat is usually associated with military activity engaging the enemy or defending the country. The information that was published raised the possibility that their children were being exposed to a health risk in the course of their military training and that various elements within the army were ignoring the information regarding the hazards of diving in the polluted waters of the Kishon. We defined the new information as emancipated representations. Whereas the danger to their children had previously been from an external source, namely the enemy, the present danger was internal, namely from home. After sharing their sense of anxiety and threat with one another, the question of faith in the military system was raised. The hegemonic representations of the parents' faith in the military system were particularly high in this military unit. The question of trust conveys the first signs of polemical representations by which the parents confronted the military system, the Ministry of Defense, and the State of Israel, which did not immediately acknowledge their responsibility for the health of the soldiers. Fragments of the previous contract were expressed in the parents' meetings: the parents did not believe that the military commanders who testified before the Commission were telling the truth. They did not believe, in light of the harsh facts being revealed, that the IDF would indeed take active responsibility for the health and welfare of the sick and for early diagnosis of disease in the healthy soldiers:

"...and what I discovered [in the Commission of Inquiry] is that an entire group of commanders did not remember... did not know... until a group of commandos appeared and remembered everything accurately... they knew how many times they had dived in the Kishon, which training exercises took place in the Kishon, which exercises were classified, and which were all-IDF exercises. And the navy's medical officers and those of the Shayetet behave like mutes..." [A father, parents meeting, 11.11.00]

It is apparent that the emancipated representations of the new information begin to arouse the polemical representations, principally a breakdown in the sense of partnership:

“We do not feel that they [the navy] are behind us...” [A mother, parents meeting, 11.11.00]

The parents prefer to maintain the homeostasis that exists by means of the hegemonic representations and seek to restore the contract on its previous terms, but are unable to do so:

“...We want the navy to stand behind us... to be loyal to us, I... you... throughout the years, I know all about this business – it’s a home, a home...” [A father, parents meeting, 11.11.00]

When faced with the emancipated representations, the polemical representations emerge in which the parents confront the system for the first time:

“But we didn’t hear anyone say ‘that’s right – we take full responsibility, we’re behind you’... but, no! We demand that these examinations be carried out. Everyone’s being evasive now...” [A father, parents meeting, 30.12.00]

In this new situation, the parents re-experience the feeling of having to protect their children themselves. Diving in the Kishon is perceived as a tangible risk; hence the parents demand that the soldiers be treated as war casualties:

“When someone dives in the Kishon ... True, they’re not all ill, but in war too, not everyone gets killed, but war kills... And here we’re talking about children... It’s not only about cancer. It’s about a long list of illnesses. What’s the difficulty in examining them?” [A mother, parents meeting, 30.12.00]

Caretaking themes that characterize early parenting functions repeatedly emerge in the parents’ dialog, such as bathing and responsibility for toilet training and personal hygiene. Bearing in mind that all the “children” are now in their 30s, it is worthy of note that it is these subjects that arise in the discussions. The parents share anecdotes about the physical care of their children within the context of their military service in general and diving in the Kishon in particular:

“Do you know what he [the son] would do when he came home? All the ointments he used, it’s really something... And as for the ‘horse soap’? I prefer not to talk about the ‘horse soap’, that black stuff, whatever it was... For four days I tried to remove the stuff, but I couldn’t get it off...” [A father, parents meeting, 30.12.00]

Reminiscing about the soldiers’ military service does not focus on acts of heroism, but rather on the parents’ caregiving roles:

“...when she [a female soldier and diving instructor] used to come home at night, and we had to help her wash her hair with Syntabon [industrial strength laundry soap] or ‘horse soap’, the way the commandos used it. We thought it was oil, or grease or crude fuel oil, although we now know that they too are carcinogenic ...” [A father, parents meeting, 30.12.00]

In their descriptions, the parents associate their parental cleaning activities with the polluted Kishon. Such caregiving functions take on new meaning in light of the emancipated representations, following the information revealed to the parents on the pollution in the Kishon and the risk of diving in its waters:

“But we didn’t know about the heavy metals, and we didn’t know about the plants discharging industrial waste into the river, and didn’t know about the ships

dumping in the middle...but now we know ...” [A father, parents meeting, 30.12.00]

The feelings of anxiety and distress expressed by the parents relate to the sense that despite actively maintaining the very basic functions of caring for their children, they themselves “failed” to protect them. Although the cause of this failure is external and explained as various state bodies concealing information, the parents experience a sense of guilt over the results of their inability to adequately safeguard their “children”. The parents of the naval commandos adopt the universal hegemonic representation of parental obligation to safeguard their children, disregarding (temporarily) their age and the fact that these children whom they so want to protect are adults and themselves parents of young children. Whereas the state’s hegemonic representations are challenged, the universal hegemonic representation is maintained.

The representations of the parents group in comparison to other groups

The army and the family have been described in previous studies as two social institutions that intersect at a particular point in time in which the “torch” of responsibility for the children is passed from the parents to the army by means of shared hegemonic representations. Coser (1974) describes the manner in which the army pressures the families to adopt their soldier children’s demand for absolute loyalty to the military unit, by stressing the national mission in view of Israeli society’s legitimate values. The parents who got together in “parents meetings” could no longer maintain their traditional identification with the hegemonic representations of trust in existing institutions. Instead, they constructed the new reality by means of a new set of internally shared representations, which could be termed “hegemonic” with regard to the new parents group, but “polemic” regarding the surrounding social institutions. The following sections describe a variety of versions by which the parental group communicated with related others. The polemic stance was not unidimensional but took differential shapes in regard to each group or social institution.

The Commission of Inquiry: The polemic stance was minimal regarding the Shamgar Commission. The parents believed and trusted Justice Shamgar, who was nominated head of the Commission, and referred to himself as “an honest man”. However, their reservations were apparent in their concerns about the length of time required for a thorough investigation to be carried out.

“The Commission has its own dynamics. ... As we know, these types of illnesses wait for no commission of inquiry...” [The father heading the parents group, parents meeting, 11.11.00]

The “Shayetet” navy unit: The attitude to this unit was ambivalent, including disagreement among the parents:

“Today I no longer have this loyalty of not daring to say a word against the Shayetet. I no longer feel that it’s my home... My son sees it [the unit] as a home, and most of the soldiers see it as a home. That’s why we demand the support of this home...” [A father, parents meeting, 11.11.00]

The army: Attitude to the army was characterized by a general breakdown in the system of trust. The parents did not believe that the military commanders who testified before the Commission were telling the truth, and that the IDF would indeed take action.

The Ministry of Defense: The parents perceived the Ministry of Defense Department of Rehabilitation as the most hostile body:

“They do everything they can not to give anything. That’s what they sit there for... They [at the Ministry of Defense] are all fooling them [the sick soldiers], they’re all lying to them. Should our children be in such hands!?” [A father, parents meeting, 30.12.00]

It is evident that the question of loyalties constituted a central issue in the parents’ polemic representations regarding institutions, but the same issue also emerged regarding social groups.

The “children”: The stance of the sons of some members of the parents group who refused to cooperate with their parents was painful, but was accepted with understanding. Moreover, they were featured as the torchbearers of the old hegemonic fidelities.

“He [the son] isn’t prepared to talk. The Shayetet is his home. That’s where his loyalty lies. He was brought up that way. The problem is that some of the commanders have forgotten this education.” [A father, parents meeting, 30.12.00]

Other parents: The polemic representations regarding parents who maintained the former spirit of “silence keepers” and refrained from taking part in the activities of the parents group was rarely addressed in their public discussions. Within smaller group discussions, however, some individuals expressed a desire to expand the group of active parents and for other families to join the group. Yet, as previously mentioned, no initiative was taken to recruit additional families. The active parents group apparently felt that they represented a far wider group of parents, even without making formal contacts with others.

Discussion

Representations are constructed in a dynamic communication process in which shared representations are organized. Structuring the representations is accomplished on the level of content, language, and the intensity of message transmittal from the group seeking to influence other groups. The parents’ dialog originates in their joint perception of themselves as an identity group with common social representations. These were not their hegemonic representations as citizens of the state, but rather as a unique subgroup of parents of “children” who served in the naval commandos, dove in the polluted Kishon River, and were exposed to a health risk. On one hand, the appointment of the Commission of Inquiry satisfied their desire for practical action to examine the correlation between the dives and the risk of cancer. However, the very fact of its establishment also validated their anxiety and their need to act concurrently with the Commission. Their parents group activity was perceived by them as evidence of their competence and power. At the same time, the parents sensed their relative weakness and did not want to relinquish their partnership with the military commanders, a source of so much pride and strength in the past.

The organization of parents to safeguard adult “children” is an uncommon occurrence. The parents who gathered in shared “parents meetings” did not necessarily hold the same opinions regarding the manner in which they themselves should act. McKinlay and Potter (1997) maintain that consensus is shaped through discourse among group members, which eventually enables group members to act towards their common objectives.

The parents group of “silence breakers” constituted a social group- task force with a common interest that did not necessitate or entail a strong personal emotional bond between group members. The group presented a common objective and action strategies: getting the “children” to go to their doctors, while the parents acted as a group before the Commission, the Ministry of Defense and other public bodies. The group’s new character, objectives, action strategies and inter-group relations were created by means of the dialog being established between the parents and which may be described as polemic representations in action.

The primary objective initially appeared very general and somewhat vague. The impression is that a shared anxiety reaction was created by the *emancipated representations* once they were acknowledged as being in conflict with the *hegemonic representations*. The group’s operative objectives, stemming directly from the desire to protect their children, took shape and became clear through the discussions involved in organizing the new group. The operative significance of the dialog stems from the creation of a united front to speak as one voice, as common *polemic representations* before the Commission, Members of Knesset, the media, and even to the “children” themselves, who tended to object to their parents’ activities.

We have no way of knowing to what degree the actions of the parents group affected the dynamics of decision-making by the authorities. The activities of the group of parents of naval commandos ended in March 2003 when the Judge who headed Commission recommended that the Minister of Defense acknowledge the state’s responsibility to care for the sick naval commandos and their families. The Minister of Defense adopted this decision and the parents were then able to readopt the democratic hegemonic representations of the mutual contribution contract that formerly existed between citizen and state. At this stage the group of parents terminated their activities. In the discussions following the decision to provide medical tests for the naval commandos, the parents group were able to merge their parental and national identities and a renewed equilibrium was created in the encounter between the social representations of the parents’ various identity groups. The knowledge and recognition of the ongoing threat to the health of the commandos who trained in the Kishon was anchored and linked to previous knowledge regarding public law and order in the state, which dictates that malfunctions be rectified. It appears that the full responsibility undertaken by the Minister of Defense following the Commission’s report compensated to a certain extent for the military commanders’ lack of responsibility towards the commandos as previously experienced by the parents, and anchors the new information in the previous and familiar world of hegemonic representations.

The existence of support groups that act as social networks, created for mutual support among those facing the same problems, is well documented in professional literature. Support groups provide emotional and concrete support for individuals and families whose equilibrium has been undermined (Gottlieb, 1985). The strength of such groups stems from the way in which they facilitate individual group members’ processing of painful situations, which would be very difficult to do outside a protected peer group of others who are undergoing similar problems (Shapiro, 1990). Research conducted in Israel among support groups for parents of soldiers (Kacen & Sofer, 1997) shows that these groups enable parents to cope with changes to family structure in their new parental role, create empowerment, and acquire tools that enable them to take action in reference to problems arising between the army and the soldiers.

The present study seeks to further expand the understanding obtained through the developing dialog between parents within the group. The shared communication allows different systems of social representations to be expressed among group members, which then receives recognition and legitimacy for its very existence. Thus, parents who hold different

opinions can continue belonging to the group despite their disagreement. Indeed, it is the conflictory “polemical” dialog that reorganizes and preserves the group members’ field of social representations and the group’s social framework. Until the exposure of possible health risks to their children resulting from dives in the Kishon during their military service, the parents were able to maintain their different identities concurrently without a sense of incongruence. The parents who organized themselves into the group of “silence breakers” could not continue to adhere to the hegemonic representations and were forced to reorganize their field of representations within the different identities and their interface with one another. This change can take place only within a group, since social representations by their very nature are created through social dialog.

The three components identified by Moscovici (2001) as expressing a group’s identity can be observed in the parents’ meetings. The parents *define* the group’s boundaries, its *attitude* towards other groups, and *create unique content*. In this situation, they construct a shared identity experience that makes it a little easier for them to face the threat. The dialog between the parents, which begins when their entire system of “self-evident” social representations is undermined, undergoes a process of creating group identity, a parents group, which enables them to act with a sense of capability and reorganize their common representations. Exposure to new information conveyed by emancipated representations does not bring about a change in ideas or create a conceptual revolution, but necessitates anchoring of the new information within the previous system of representations and organizing new relationships between the various representations to obtain a feeling of internal integration or renewed coherence between the different representations. The documentary material obtained from the parents’ discussions shows a high degree of similarity in their shared hegemonic representations in social and emotional content, imagery, beliefs and parental feelings. The dynamic role of social representations, in assisting the parents to reorganize their social representations when faced with new information, was manifested through the spontaneous formation of a task force in which polemic representations emerged until the process of resuming the hegemonic representations was completed.

The unique significance of the parents’ organization, from the perspective of social representations, is that it sheds light on the dynamic and functional nature of social representations. Furthermore, it demonstrates how new information that came from emancipated representations is restructured by anchoring the unfamiliar, transforming it into the familiar, thus enabling group members to act with a sense of internal empowerment, wholeness and capability when faced with new circumstances.

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