Communication

A Comparative Perspective on the Social Representation
of Political Power by Gender

Mihaela Rus[1], Mihaela Luminita Sandu[2], Ionel Simionca[3]

Abstract: Refined and institutionalized as an expression in the human world, however, power is not a human invention. For many species, power relationships are an intra- and inter- generational stake and strictly configure their daily life. There is no wonder that ethology places the idea of power among the primary aspects of social life and, together with evolutionary psychology, submits it to comparative analyzes at human - infrahuman levels, representing thus an inexhaustible research on the meaning and destiny of power. Inevitably, through the priority directions of social psychology – such as social influence, interpersonal or intergroup relations, social status and roles, social comparison, the construction of individual and collective identities etc. - power issues greatly interfered with the differences between the sexes.

Keywords: social representation; political power; gender

1. Introduction

Inevitably, through several priority directions of social psychology - social influence, interpersonal or intergroup relations, social status and roles, social comparison, the construction of individual and collective identities etc. - power issues greatly interfered with the differences between the sexes.

Why does the gender variable or its corollary, i.e. the gender stereotypes, seem to naturally connect to power phenomenology? The arguments of various authors relate

[1] "Ovidius" University, Romania, Address: 124 Mamaia Blvd, 1 Aleea Universității, Romania, Tel.: +40241-606467, Corresponding author: psiholog_m@yahoo.com.
[2] Dr. Psychology Specialist – Individual Psychology Cabinet, Romania, Address: 144 Mircea cel Batran Str., Bl. MD7B, Sc. B, AP. 32, Constanta, Romania, Corresponding author: mihaela_psy1977@yahoo.com.
[3] Dr. Psychology Specialist – Individual Psychology Cabinet, Romania, E-mail: psiholog_m@yahoo.com.

to the strongly prescriptive status of this variable or to the stereotype associated to it, in relation to other social variables.

Power relations are established between real people clearly differentiated as males or females. This lesson is learned early, from direct experiences, which other variables do not always provide at any step. Sex is the only natural dichotomous and strongly salient variable. Unlike other stereotypes, sex is very close to the presumed reality and, at the same time, it is a widely spread one. The traditional social organization, in all its segments, is marked by the dichotomy of sex: from activities to clothes. In line with these arguments, which may continue, there is also the natural position of those who see these relationships between the sexes as default relationships of power.

By their content, social representations are social mental reproductions, i.e. images of group behavior relationships, of individuals' relationships, of statuses, communication and psychosocial processes within the group.

Among the various meanings of the concept of social representation, the following drew our attention:

- *the psychosocial phenomenon involving specific ways of understanding and communication, which creates both reality and common sense; implicitly, social representations also constitute as a system of values, concepts and practices related to the objects belonging to the social environment* (Moscovici, 1984, pp. 181-210);

- *the form of practical knowledge, developed and shared socially whereby a subject relates to an object, thus competing to build a common reality, a social whole* (Jodelet, 1991);

- *principles generating standpoints related to specific insertions into a set of social relations, and organizing symbolic processes which intervene within these relationships* (Doise, 1992);

- *the process of developing a perceptual and mental reality that transforms social objects (things, people, situations, events) into symbolic categories (values, beliefs, ideology), giving them a cognitive status and allowing the understanding of daily life by the readmission of the individual's behavior across social interactions* (Fischer, 1992);

- *a system for the interpretation of reality, which governs the relations between individuals and their physical and social environment, determining their behavior and practices; the socio - cognitive construction, representing a guide to action, insofar as it involves a set of anticipations and expectations* (Abirc, 1995);

- *a method for rendering the intuitive images in terms of the existing or imaginary psychosocial interaction of individuals, social processes, events, human actions* (Dictionary of Social Psychology, 1981).

The key points drawn from these definitions, which establish the significance of social representations, ar: the cognitive component, the social component and the signifying nature of representation, significance determined by the contextual anchoring system of representation. In this sense, one can speak of a double contextual determinism, i.e. discursive and social. The discursive contextualization takes into consideration the situational factors that contribute to the development of representations, while the social one includes the global elements of the variables that generate representations (Abirc, 2002). The meaning attached to representations is a condition to its ecological applicability. Another aspect may be added to these descriptions of the specificities of representations, i.e. the organized and structured nature of representations. Moreover, one can speak of an internal organization of representations, hypothesis generated by the central node theory (Abirc, 1995), according to which any representation is organized around a central node.

The social representation gives a greater prominence to the "subjective" reality (constructed by the individual) than to the objective reality.

The political power has had many definitions, depending on how it has been understood. These definitions can be classified as psychologist, behavioral, structural-functionalist, socio-political, formal etc. From a psychological perspective, the political power represents the implementation of the desired effects within the relationship between rulers and the ruled (Carpinski, 1998). The behavioral definitions show power as a particular type of behavior consisting in the possibility of changing the behavior of others. This theory is not satisfying, because it reduces the strength of the behavior. Its contribution to the development of the concept consists, however, in the scientific experiment proposed, in the ability to measure and quantify, even partially, the political behavior. T. Parsons's American structural-functional theory states that the goals of power are the goals of the community (society).

Some authors define state power, given the role of this institution within the field of power. Franz Neuman sees political power as the social power concentrated within the state (Neuman, 1954). G Burdeau also supports a similar position (Baudeau, 1966); however, in his case, there is no clear demarcation between state and political power. "Through politics – Burdeau states – the group reveals the consciousness it has on itself; it tends to make it active by power, in order to cut its future through it". This is an incorrect fact, as the state is only one component of power and not the power itself. The power system, in addition to the state, also includes other political institutions with an increasing role within the political life, such as political parties, the form of government, the political system etc.

2. Research Objectives

This research aims to conduct a two-folded analysis of the social representation of power, in order to achieve a complex comparison between male and female perspectives. Women's representations of power are less structured than men's representations. With this objective, the research has a dual status, i.e. an ascertaining and an explanatory one.

3. Research Hypotheses

It is assumed that there is a mainly negative polarization of the social representations of power, regardless of the subjects' sex, given the temporal context of the research: a period marked by the population's negative attitudes towards the performance of the Romanian political and economic power. It is assumed that there are both similarities and differences in the representations of power, at the two categories of subjects classified by gender.

4. The Participants to the Study

In order to achieve the initially set objectives, 66 persons participated in this research (32 male respondents and 34 female respondents), aged between 22 and 84 years, with the mean age of 47.12 years.

Of the 66 study participants, 51.5 % are female, and 48.5 % are male. Of the 66 study participants, 46 are married (69.7%), 8 are not married (12.1%), 7 are divorced (10.6

%) and 5 are widowed (7.6%). Analyzing the distribution of the study participants according to the variable "education", it is noted that 26 respondents have higher education studies (39.4%), 21 respondents have secondary education studies (31.8%), 10 respondents have post-secondary studies (15.2%), 5 respondents have postgraduate studies (7.6 %), and 4 respondents have primary education (6.1 %).

5. Research Instruments

In order to obtain an edifying representation of a social object, it is absolutely necessary to observe a principle of wide recognition; due to its pluri-methodological approach, this study uses two methods:

5.1. The Free Association Method

Using an inductor word - *power* - respondents were asked to write down the first five words that come to their mind in relation to the stimulus and to justify them. The advantages of this method are the high work speed and the access to the respondents' spontaneous production, unchanged by the logic and constraints of a discursive act. Once the five words or phrases engendered by the inductor word had been written down, the respondents were asked to choose three words or expressions that seem the most relevant and to present them in order (first, second, third).

5.2. The Interview Method

The structured interview used in this research has been applied in order to gather data for a thorough content analysis. The interview guide was divided into 24 questions on information regarding the significance of power, the environments for the exercise of power, the existence of a "strong" power, the ration between individual and power, the reactions towards power, the characterization of the people in power, its forms (charismatic power), symbols, colors associated to it, personal expectation to holding power etc.

6. Data Analysis and Interpretation of the Results

The data were subjected to various processing, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. For a better tracking, we are going to present the methods employed for the analysis of the results, structured according to the organization criterion, i.e. the free association method and the interview method.

6.1. Data Analysis by the Free Association Method

The free association method allowed the identification of the structural elements belonging to the social representations of power, i.e. the central core and the peripheral elements.

The treatment procedure of the evocation produced by free association corresponds to that proposed by Verges (2001). This consists in determining the centrality of social representations by creating a congruence between the *frequencies of occurrence* of the elements and their *rank of occurrence*. Since, in this study, the subjects were asked to arrange, in the order of importance, the first three words which came to their mind in connection to power, the frequency of terms and their ranking were taken into account within the analysis (the first three terms deemed important were included in the database, in the order of their importance).

The first step in assessing this type of data is represented by the prototypicality analysis, by combining the frequency of terms with their importance deemed by the respondents, because taking into account only the frequency of terms is not a relevant factor in determining centrality. A term may have a high frequency, but it may not be cited or elected at the forefront and, therefore, it may not be significant.

The table below shows the evocations of the greatest importance for the word power.

It is easily noticed that the most frequent and most important term is money (22.7%), followed at a great distance by force (12.1 %), relationships (7.6 %), intelligence and accountability (4 5%), but also by authority and corruption (3%).

Money is considered by respondents as prerequisites for getting and holding power, as the consequences of this status and as the means of exercising power. An explanation of this centrality may have originated in the low economic level of our contemporary Romanian society, money becoming a sort of "obsession", came to be regarded as a way to get almost anything. Thus, we find that the post-revolutionary Romanian reality generated a fact that is very difficulty to contest: i.e. money

outperforms competence, knowledge, culture, civility, common sense, responsibility etc.

The same picture, with an identical hierarchy of the most important words associated to power, is observed in the case of the second option, as money was evoked at a rate of 22.7%, followed by force and influence (4.5 %), corruption, fame, independence and politics (3%).

The same results were found in the case of the third option regarding the importance of the word power. Thus, money is again in the lead (10.6 %), followed by respect (4.5%), but also by authority, corruption, domination, influence, relationships, responsibility, security (3%).

Among the words associated to power, there can also be identified a great "global economic power", i.e. USA (3%).

Analyzing the importance of the three options for the word power, it appears that money, force, influence and respect may be considered as certain consequences of holding power, and as personal premises of the individual who holds power. Authority, corruption, domination, relationships, independence, responsibility, safety, power appear as secondary aspects of power.

In addition, analyzing the frequency of these terms and their ranking, the results indicate that the central elements of the social representations of the power are money, force and relationships, followed by influence, corruption and authority. The peripheral elements of the social representations of power are domination, independence, responsibility and safety.

By their nature, the social representations of power indicate the ambivalent positioning of subjects. They aimed both at the intrinsic power and at the extrinsic one, i.e. the strong individual and the one in power, giving priority, at least in the central nucleus, to the latter.

Based on the initially set assumptions, we conducted a comparative analysis of the social representations of power for the two subgroups of respondents (men and women).

Regarding the core elements of power - money, force, relationships – they are approximately equally present to both men and women, with the specification that money is more common in women (7M, 8F), and relationships appear more frequently in men (3M, 2F).

We should also notice the difference between men and women regarding the peripheral elements of the social representation of power.

Thus, in men, there are words such as skill, ambition, dominance, energy, personality, prestige, corruption; in women, there are words such as abuse, authority, benefits, features, impact, freedom, organization, safety, status, unity etc.

It should be noted that, regarding the peripheral elements, there are several elements that differ, depending on factors such as the biological sex. It can be seen that the polarity of these elements inserts within the central nucleus a negative connotation for men and a positive connotation for women.

In the case of the second option, the evocations are similar to those in the first option, but we should not overlook the fact that there is a frequency difference regarding the central element.

Thus, in the men's case, money is less frequently mentioned than in the women's case (6M, 9F). However, the core elements remain the same. The same situation exists in the case of peripheral elements. In men's case, they bring a negative connotation to central elements (skill, agility, procurement, bribery, senator); in women's case, they have a positive connotation (administration, authority, security, intelligence).

Regarding the third option for the social representation of power, money remains the central element; however, force is no longer mentioned, being replaced by respect, but its frequency of occurrence does not remove it from the central representation core of power.

As far as it concerns the third option for the words related to power, men have a higher frequency in the evocation of money (4M, 3F), and in the evocation of respect (2M, 1F). The same similarity is found in the peripheral elements. Among men's evocations, there are magnification, fame, car, control, earnings, leadership; women evoked: work, pride, struggle, function, family, faith, authority, abuse.

In conclusion, if we consider the similarities, both men and women have evoked the same terms associated to power in the central nucleus, with small differences in their frequency of occurrence; however, globally, on all three options, the results are the same.

The differences between the two subgroups occur in the peripheral elements that bring a negative connotation to the central elements for men and a positive one for women. Moreover, compared to men, women had in mind not only the extrinsic

power - the individual in power – but also the intrinsic one – the strong individual (authority, faith, safety). This could explain the superior positive connotation of their representation.

6.2. Data Analysis by the Interview Method

Processing the answers to the 24 questions, the classical content analysis was developed, in the first phase. Thus, for each question, there were obtained from 4 to 18 categories of response. Next, in order to determine whether there are similarities and differences between men and women's answers, we performed an analysis of the data obtained by comparative frequency tables and graphs.

Analyzing the frequency of responses to the question "In your opinion, what does power mean?", it is noticed that the highest frequency occurs in the answer "the will of physical and intellectual expression", followed by "force", "authority", "lobbyists' tool", defense", "benefits" etc.

Analyzing the answers by comparing the two subgroups (male and female), it is noticed that for men the word power means "force" and "a complex of skills", and for women it means "the will for physical and intellectual expression", "something supreme", "availability", "control", "authority".

To the question "What do you think of when you hear the word power?", 10 respondents answered "money and interests", 7 respondents answered "political class", 6 respondents thought of "domination" and "fame and work", 5 respondents answered "corruption" and "force".

Analyzing the answers by comparing the two subgroups (male and female), it is noticed that men, when thinking of power, they think more of "domination", "money and interests" and "future", and women think of "the organization of society", "administration", "force" and "energy".

For the question "In your opinion, power binds only political and economic phenomena or is it something more general?", the most frequent answer was "something broader" followed by the answer "a little more general". We should not avoid the answer "only the political and economic phenomena", meaning that 14 of the total 66 subjects found that power is only linked to these phenomena.

Analyzing the answers by comparing the two subgroups (male and female), it is noticed that both men and women think similarly about the analyzed item, so there is a similarity of responses.

When asked "What is a strong power in your opinion?" the most frequent answer was "domination"; however, other significantly frequent answers were also given, i.e. "forced decision", "power in the service of society" and absolute power. It is noteworthy that, at this question, 10 respondents from 66 respondents did not know what a strong power is.

Analyzing the answers by comparing the two subgroups (male and female), it is noticed that men consider strong power as "forced decision" and as "military power", while women consider it as "the power in the service of society" but also as a "discretionary power" or as "absolute power". However, there is a similarity regarding the answers to this question, as both men and women think that strong power is "domination".

When asked "Statistically speaking, do you think that people want power, refuse it or are uninterested in it?", the most frequent answer was "they want power".

When analyzing the answers by comparing the two subgroups (male and female), it appears that both men and women think that people want power; however, a larger number of women believe that people are uninterested in power.

When asked "It is said that people would rather obey than command. What do you think?" nearly half of respondents believe that people prefer to command, 17 respondents believe that this depends on the people's character, but there are also 12 respondents who believe that people like to obey.

When analyzing the answers by comparing the two subgroups (male and female), it is noticed that many women think that people prefer to command, but they say that it depends on their character, while more men think that only the socially oppressed people obey.

When asked "Some people are afraid to hold power. In your opinion, why?" the most frequent answer is "fear of failure", but we should not overlook the answers "incompetence" and "responsibility".

Comparing the two subgroups of subjects, we can say that most men consider that some people are afraid of failure and, therefore, they will not hold power, while women think that these people do not know what to do, because they are afraid of the consequences. However, there are similarities in the two subgroups as far as it concerns the answers "responsibility" and "incompetence".

The following four questions in the interview guide (questions 8, 9, 10, 11) refer to the portrait of the person holding power. The results underline that the people in

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power do not show particular physical traits, but there are certain personality traits that differentiate the people in power from those who do not hold it.

Women believe that a person who holds the power has the following features:

- positive character traits: diplomacy, communication skills, confidence, courage, optimism;
- behavior: he/she exercises the rights attached to this position, winner;
- positively transforming the person: in attitude, commitment, and depending on the character.

Men appreciate the following features:

- both positive and negative character traits: honesty, justice, respect, forbearance, fortitude, and ignorance;
- behavior: domineering, arrogant;
- negatively transforming the person: they become inhuman, masters of the universe, arrogant.

It should be noted that the positively connoted responses belong to women, and the negatively connoted ones belong to men. This could be explained either by a more tolerant attitude towards women, or through a lower stake, represented by power in the feminine universe, or by their divergent orientation (some answers have a double connotation).

Questions 12 and 13 of the interview guide refer to the respondents' emotional reactions when exercising power, and to the exercise of power on others.

When ask how they react when the power is exercised over them, male respondents answered that they approve it if it is legally regulated and that they reject it if it is an abuse; women answered that they submit it when the person is right. Both men and women answered in a similar way, namely that they do not feel so good when someone exercises power over them, that it depends on the situation and that they fight back in such situations.

When asked how they feel when they exercise power over others, a significant number of respondents said that they do not like it (17 respondents). However, an almost equal number of respondents (14) answered that they feel good about it. These data are consistent with the results according to which people want power. It is normal that when a certain desire is fulfilled, the emotional experiences lie in the positive sphere.

The differences in answers can be interpreted by different plans activated by this question. Regarding women, we may speak about an ideal plan, of hypothetical power situations; regarding men, we may speak about a real plan, of the recollection of the experiences lived in situations of power.

When asked "Usually the people who hold power are flattered by others? Why do they do it?" the majority of respondents answered that they do it for benefits, but also for flattery, in order to solve the situation and because they lack dignity.

Women believe that the persons in power are flattered by others in order to solve a situation, but also for benefits, while men consider that people in power are flattered by others for flattery and fear.

Questions 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19 of the interview guide refer to what charismatic power means and to what the portrait of the charismatic person is. The results reveal that the charismatic power concerns, in the respondents' opinion, the persuasion and the behavior of those who have enjoyed this kind of power. We should mention that a representative number of respondents do not know what charismatic power is (20 subjects).

Regarding the difference between charismatic power and other forms of power, half of the respondents said that they do not know what this difference was or they said that there was no difference.

At question 17, which required answers on the existence of particular physical traits found in charismatic individuals, the answers were negative, i.e. "charismatic people do not have particular physical traits"; the same can not be said about the charismatic people's personality traits and behavior.

Women believe that a charismatic person has the following features:

- personality traits: good orator, happy, daring, ambitious, proud, trustful, benevolent, kind, noble;
- behavior: he/she imposes himself/herself, benevolent, nonchalant;
- men believe that a charismatic person has the following features;
- personality traits: intelligence, persuasion and arrogance;
- behavior: he/she can speak; he/she is unpredictable, energetic.

These responses could be explained by the fact that women give a positive connotation to the traits of charismatic people, and men give them both a positive and a negative connotation.

When asked "What are, in your opinion, the symbols of power?" the most frequent answers were "money, relationships", but there was also a representative number of respondents (18 respondents) who did not know which were the symbols of power.

Analyzing the answers by comparing the two subgroups (male and female), it appears that many women find that the symbols of power are the crown, the scepter, but also strength, fairness, health, influence; men consider that symbols of power are the emblem, the flag but also the position, the word, the professional competence and the thirst for knowledge.

However, for both groups, the main symbols of power are money and relationships.

When asked "If you had to assign a color to symbolize power, what would you choose?" the most frequent answers were "red", followed by "black" and "white".

Analyzing the answers by comparing the two subgroups (male and female), it appears that more women consider red as the color of power, followed by orange, pink and the tricolor, while men took into consideration white, black and gray. Incidentally, red is the favorite color generally attributed to women; it is, therefore, a specifically female color. Starting from here we, could say that power is feminine?

When asked "Can one imagine a society without power?" the most frequent answers were "there would be anarchy" and "there would be chaos".

Analyzing the answers by comparing the two subgroups (male and female), it appears that more women believe it would be anarchy and chaos if there was no power; a society can exist without power, but it must be an intelligent society. Some men believe that there can be a society without power, but it would be like "a herd without a shepherd".

When asked "What do you think, is it likely for you to get power?" the most frequent answer was "no, you must have money and relationships"; some respondents were more confident and believed that physical and mental endowment may help them gain power, but others can get it through work, entering the party in power or by competition. 12 subjects did not think that they can get power.

Analyzing the answers by comparing the two subgroups (male and female), it appears that more women believe that they will not get power, while most men think that they can get power through work and competition, but physical and intellectual endowment, as well as money and relationships may also help them get power. An equal number of men and women believe that they can get power through work.

When asked "If you had power, what would you do?" the most frequent answer was "I would do a lot of good things". There are, however, 16 respondents who did not know what would do if they had power; 12 respondents said that they would do a lot of good things if they held power.

Analyzing the answers by comparing the two subgroups (male and female), it is noticed that most women do not know what they would do if they had the power, while men said that they would make more money, change the political class and exercise power with good faith. Women also would abolish the mafia groups and diminish aggressiveness.

7. Conclusions

In this research, the focus was both on identifying the differences between men and women in terms of their social representations of power and on establishing the relationship between similarities and differences. The main point is that, at the first glance, the subjects did not greatly differ in their social representations of power. This concept is perceived by the two categories, i.e. male and female, as a general phenomenon (natural, psychological, social), indispensable to the individual and to the human society, wanted by people, generating benefits and status, which stimulates the flattery of the mighty or of the persons in power. Charismatic power is viewed with sympathy, while the strong power is seen as domination. The ability to have or hold personal power is a significant expectation for both categories. Money and relationships are perceived as the main symbols of power, money dominating the two central cores of the representation (money - power - relationships and money - power - influence).

For women, power means authority, abuse, advantages, positions, safety, bringing positive changes in the holder's personality; distrust fuels the fear of having power, although its exercise makes a person feel good. Power is mostly female and it is, definitely, red. For men it represents domination, energy, skill, prestige, corruption; it generates negative changes in the holder's personality; the fear of failure and the fear of responsibility fuel the fear of holding power and its exercise creates an ambivalent state, i.e. both a good and bad one. Power is definitely masculine and has complementary colors, such as white, black, gray. Pausing at the above, we can say that the two hypotheses were confirmed, with both similarities and differences in the social representation of power between the two subgroups (men and women). However, the polarization of the social representation of power is predominantly

negative, meaning that the central core of representation consists of the following elements: money, relationships, influence, force, and corruption (the latter in men's opinion).

The answers to the questionnaire represent combined polarizations, some mostly positive, other mostly negative, with a privileging of the negative view, in both subgroups. The participants in the study referred, within this research, to the generic term of power, in both cases: intrinsic and extrinsic, but also in its extra-human forms, i.e. divine power, valued unreservedly. Several theoretical and empirical approaches analyze and confirm the different statuses of power, for men or women. Whether we talk about the practice of the extrinsic power (as a social phenomenon, institutionalized or not) or about the intrinsic power (of the individual over himself/herself), it is clear that the stakes of this attribute have a different ontogenetic status for both sexes.

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