

# The mute zone of social representation regarding persons with special needs in Romania. Substitution indications

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the results of research conducted in the years 2008-2009, which proposed to outline the social representation regarding people with special needs and, in a subjacent way, to highlight the mute zone in social representation regarding disabled persons, by using a methodology specific to this type of approach (the substitution method). The subjects answered a series of questionnaires that combined the classical method of free association (Le Bouedec, 1984) with a categorical and prototypical technique (Vergès, 1992; Abric & Vergès, 1994, etc.) in order to underline the social representation structure of the disabled person, as well as with the substitution technique, that facilitates the observation of counter-normative elements and the knowledge of the mute zone in the social representation regarding the disabled person. The research managed to delimit – for the first time in Romania – the social representation regarding the person with special needs, as well as the mute zone of this representation, thus following the line of the preferred subjects and the current research methods within social European psychology. This study reveals how, perpetuating normative messages, the public discourse, as the carrier and transmitter of best practices, strengthens social censorship when it comes to expressing our discriminatory attitudes and beliefs, designing the disabled person as a socially sensitive object.

**Keywords:** social representation, the mute zone in the representation, disability, substitution method, counter-normative elements.

## I. Introduction

By systematising the definition of the social representation (SR) in a concise and yet exhaustive formula, J.-C. Abric sees SR as an organized and structured ensemble of information, beliefs, opinions and attitudes that constitute a particular socio-cognitive system, made up of two subsystems in interaction: a central system/core and a peripheral system (Abric, 1994, 2002, etc.). By simultaneously applying the quantitative (frequency) and the qualitative (rank) criteria, Vergès (1992) refines this approach through an hierarchized structural model that is preserved from the initial definition of the central core, as well as the peripheral structures (detailed, by frequency,

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in the first periphery and the second periphery), but he also introduces in the equation contrastive elements, defined as quantitatively important and qualitatively low.

A relatively recent development of the general SR theory, delimits – from the ensemble of certain representations – a series of highly relevant elements, which, in normal conditions, would not be highlighted. By occupying, in the structure of representation, the so-called *mute zone*, they characterize only that SR which refers to “«sensitive» social objects that generally include in their representational field objects, cognitions and beliefs that are liable to call into question the moral values or social norms that are held by the subject’s in-group” (Guimelli & Deschamps, 2000). Sharing common points with the theory of “dormant” schemes (*schèmes dormants*) coined by Abric & Guimelli (1998), this new theoretical development, due to structuralists, follows the idea path of considering the central core as the dwelling of certain elements that can be active or “dormant”. Through the delimitation made by Abric within the last category, the mute zone (made by the “dormant” elements because they cannot be expressed) becomes individualized in rapport with the subset of the “dormant” elements because they are not activated (Abric, 2003).

Considering the mute zone in the representation as made of counter-normative elements, which cannot be expressed by the individual without contradicting the group norms (Abric, 2003), the new position of the structuralists may be interpreted, in our opinion, also as their reply to the approach on the SR as an expression of the group exclusively, a vision that would diminish the importance of the individual as a thinking being and as an active part of the social life. The observation seems all the more plausible as these mute zones in the SR appear as highly individualized: they express the beliefs of the individual as part of a group, but who also keep deep inside his/her own opinion regarding the object of the representation, an opinion that he/she cannot express, in order to avoid conflict with the group norms or to prevent contradicting a series of general norms (human rights, the right to free circulation, racial discrimination, etc.).

Through the external pressures exerted by the social norm (within which the need of being *politically correct* is only a small facet of the problem), the social representation regarding the disabled person represents one of those “sensitive” objects (Deschamps & Guimelli, 2001) which, in the opinion of structuralist scientists, favour and maintain the existence of the so-called mute zone. This zone is “made up of representational elements that are not revealed by the subject through classical data collection methods, elements considered counter-

normative” (Abric, 2003) or “cognitions or beliefs that the subjects do not express spontaneously under normal answering conditions, mostly due to normative social pressures exerted on the individuals” (Guimelli & Deschamps, 2000). Given the presence of the counter-normative elements, the mute zone of the social representation can only be identified through special methods, among which the substitution method plays an essential role. Hence, starting from a common association task, the subject will be required to answer as another person would; the *substitution levels* proposed, setting themselves further and further away from the typology of the in-group, which reduces normative pressure.

### ***Research hypothesis***

Formulated in the swirl of the general theory on the existence of a mute zone of representation, our hypothesis is that the object of social representation regarding the disabled person, being sensitive, includes a sum of cognitions and beliefs which, though latent, cannot be exteriorized, under normal conditions but held high by the group with the risk of calling into question the precise moral values of social norms (cf. Guimelli & Deschamps, 2000, p. 53). Hence, it can be stated that the subject “masks” certain zones of the representational field (*the masking effect, la zone masquée* – Flament, Guimelli & Abric, 2006), and the researcher tries, through various methods, to get to these hidden zones (the mute zone in the representation). The researcher starts from the premise that they actually represent the real position of the subject regarding the object of the representation.

Considering that the disabled person makes the object of negative beliefs and judgments that obviously come against the non-discrimination social norm (the operant in contemporary society), we have launched the working hypothesis that these counter-normative elements comprised in the representational field could be activated by reducing the degree of implication of the subject concerning the object of representation. Considering that these elements of the SR are not expressed because of normative pressure, previous studies dedicated to the mute zone in the representation have proposed the modification of the experimental instructions in the sense of reducing normative pressure, by using *the substitution technique* (Guimelli & Deschamps, 2000; Abric, 2003; Flament et al., 2006, etc.), also utilized in this study.

## **II. Method**

### ***Participants***

The research – conducted in order to underline the SR concerning an individual with special needs and, as a second purpose, to identify the mute zone in the representation through the substitution method – included a number of 636 participants, students at the Faculty of Construction and Installation within “Gheorghe Asachi” Technical University (208 subjects), at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration (143 subjects), at the Faculty of History (150 subjects) and at the Faculty of Letters (136 subjects), the last three within “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University. The purpose was to cover as many specialties as possible, on one hand in order to ensure the gender balance (57.44% females, 42.56% males) and on the other, starting from the premise that the results obtained on a student population balanced between the humanities (46.05%) and the exact sciences (53.95%) will allow for an extrapolation of the results to an entire social group; in our case, to the group of university students.

### ***Instruments***

This research is exploratory; the initial intention is that of underlining and describing the social representation regarding the person with special needs in Romanian contemporary society and then even outlining a general plan of its evolution over the past 20 years. Afterwards, we proposed to follow the evolution of a new concept in the field of social representations, *the mute zone in the representation*; more precisely, we want to identify its presence and to delimit its place within the social representation regarding persons with special needs in Romania.

Considering that the research methodological approach of the social representation comprises four phases (Abric, 2003, p. 62) like:

- collecting the explicit content of social representation;
- identifying the mute zone of the SR;
- studying the structure of representation and of its central core;
- control of centrality,

we have had in view – in this study – to identify the elements comprising the social representation (both the normative and expressible ones, and the counter-normative ones, verbalised only by using special techniques), as well as to define their distribution manner, by frequency and importance).

### ***Research design***

#### ***Standard instructions***

Initially, through the free association method, the respondents were asked to mention, within a pre-determined period (10 minutes), the first five words or phrases spontaneously associated to one of the two inductor terms

retained after analysing the results obtained through the first study (see *supra*): *disabled person* or *handicapped person*.

Hence, in the second phase of the experiment the subjects were required to associate numbers to answers, ranging between 1 (a higher rank) and 5 (a lower rank), depending on the importance ascribed to them. Hence, by crossing the quantitative indicators (the frequency of the item) with qualitative information (the importance given by the subjects), information can be obtained regarding the centrality of the respective item.

Because the essential purpose is to outline the main elements of social representation regarding the individual with special needs, methods specific to the technique of data collection in the study of social representations (see *infra*) were used. In order to highlight the main elements of social representation regarding the persons with special needs, we used the categorical and prototypical technique (Vergès, 1992; Abric & Vergès, 1994, etc.), comprised of a combination between the quantitative dimension (word frequency) and the qualitative dimension (the importance given by the subject to each element). Following the same approach, we elaborated a table to analyse the hierarchized evocations of the subjects, following the model proposed by Vergès (1992), thus obtaining information on the structure of the social representation when it comes to persons with special needs; we also identified the central core and the peripheral elements of social representation.

Concretely, we guided our research on the opinion that the elements of each social representation are structured as four delimited fields, depending on the criteria *frequency* and *rank*, as it results from the scheme below:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <i>Zone of the central core</i><br>(high frequency, high evocation) | <i>First periphery</i><br>(high frequency, low evocation)     |
| <i>Contrastive elements</i><br>(low frequency, high evocation)      | <i>The second periphery</i><br>(low frequency, low evocation) |

#### *The substitution instructions*

As all minority groups that constitute the target of negative stereotypes, disabled persons in Romania make the object of a social representation that includes in its field – besides the socially desirable, hence expressible components – also a series of counter-normative beliefs and judgments, whose explicit manifestation in certain social situations would be perceived as a transgression of the social norms. This way, taking into account that the object of the social representation regarding the disabled

person is a “sensitive” one, we assumed that certain elements within the representational field are subjected to self-censorship and that they will remain latent in the standard instructions of the research.

Hence, through the second item of the questionnaire, we used the substitution technique (Guimelli & Deschamps, 2000; Abric, 2003; Flament et al., 2006, etc.), meant to reduce the normative pressure upon the subject (see *infra*) and, in this way, to highlight that zone in the SR concerning disabled persons that remains “masked” in “normal” experimental conditions. Starting from a common association task, within the experiment, the subject is required to answer as another person would. The substitution levels, further and further from the initial ones, thus reduce the normative pressure upon the subject (the person of reference should belong to the same group as the subject, by mentioning that the dimensions of the group are highly relative; they vary by the extension degree of the research, for instance, from a group of medical students, to the one represented by Romanians in general).

This method was used, with very interesting results, in the research from the year 2000 that Guimelli and Deschamps dedicated to the representation regarding the gypsies, but it has also known previous validities (Cates & Messick, 1996; Beauvois, Gilibert, Pansu & Abdelaoui, 1998), in psychological research outside the field of social representations. By using the association method, in standard conditions, the two researchers arrived at a central core of the SR made up of the words *nomads*, *family*, *music*. On the contrary, in conditions of substitution instructions (“answer as the French in general would”), they also obtained the word *thief* which, once it becomes the most important word of the representation (according to frequency), substantially changes its meaning. This way, the occurrence indicator, which varies substantially – from 20% of the subjects in normal context to 60% of the subjects in substitution conditions – persuasively supports the hypothesis that this word is part of the mute zone of the SR concerning gypsies (Guimelli & Deschamps, 2000).

For the elaboration of this research, we used our own version of the substitution technique. We proposed the use of three substitution levels: *students in general*, *Romanians in general* and *EU citizens*, unlike the previous researches (Abric, Guimelli, Deschamps, etc.), which proposed only two substitution levels (1. Persons in the close belongingness group 2. The subject’s community).

In order to underline the importance of the results obtained through the substitution technique, the data analysis also included a comparison to the data obtained through the standard identification method of social representations. For accuracy purposes, we preserved the names of the

categories used within the experimental manipulation. We have to mention that, when referring to the category of students, we actually took into account the projection of the subject himself/herself; the phrase students in general refers to the current in-group of the subjects; the phrase Romanians in general refers to family, friends, to the influences received in the formation period of social representation, etc. (out-group), while the EU citizens represent the furthest category, to which we often refer to as an imposed or assumed model, omnipresent in the post-Revolution Romanian society.

For the most part, the working hypothesis for the category of EU citizens is related to idea of a such distant substitution level, that the subjects will find it very difficult to project themselves on this level, mostly that, given they have not been EU citizens for long. Romanians only have general information on this space (second rank information, mainly obtained from the media). From this perspective, we appreciated that the SR elements concerning the disabled person for this substitution level were mainly positive. First, because most good practice models come from the EU and, secondly, because such a distant perspective would eliminate all inhibitions, a reason for which the subjects would express themselves without considering the Romanian context at all. This would allow for obtaining results that show an attitude regarding the disabled persons “as it should be”, as the Romanian population believes that the disabled persons are treated in the European Union.

This hypothesis is based on the idea that each subject – mostly that we are talking about students – has minimal knowledge on human rights, on equality of chances, on the normalcy of the relations between the members of the community and that the subject will want to show that he/she has this knowledge, in a word, that he/she knows the theory and the concrete situation in Romania. Especially since we are talking about sensitive social objects, such as the person with special needs, the social desirability bias will be more accentuated, as the subject will want to prove that he/she is part of the category of those who discriminate or who do not respect the rights of others.

According to the structural approach, two representations are different to the extent to which their central systems are different. In our research, the quasi-identity of the central elements clearly indicates that, in the two experimental situations, we are dealing with the same social representation, and the specifics of the mute zone in the representation is given by those elements unidentified in “normal” conditions but expressed in substitution conditions. We would like to make these things clear in order to underline them in this case, there are not two different social representations, but only one social representation. Moreover, it represents the mute zone of this

representation, to the extent to which the hypothesis of the mute zone of the social representation turns out to be valid for the social representation studied here.

### **III. Results**

*The elements that make up the mute zone in the SR concerning the person with special needs in Romania*

*Central core of the SR concerning disabled persons (the substitution instructions)*

The existence of the mute zone of the social representation is attested by the presence of counter-normative elements that do not appear in normal investigation conditions that can be identified only through special data collection techniques. These “hidden” or “masked elements” do not significantly influence the representational field if their presence only concerns the peripheral zones of the representation; however, when they are activated on the level of the central system of representation, they may alter the general meaning of the representation.

Coming back to the constitutive elements of the central system, we bring into the discussion again the dichotomy functional elements versus normative elements, to which we add the existence of two types of dormant elements: non-activated elements and non-expressible elements. Hence, some functional elements of the central core not useful in a given context become inactive or, in Guimelli’s opinion, “dormant”. Concerning this study, we focused our research on the “dormant” components of the central core, which are “hidden” or non-expressible because the expression of these elements, socially undesirable, would mean transgressing the social norm and subversively attacking, from the inside, one’s own image (taking into account the natural tendency of the individual to transmit the most favourable image to the others).

As “the hidden, unexpressed facet of representation” (Abric, 2003), the mute zone of the SR cannot be revealed to the other. Normally, the subject will find it hard to recognize the existence of this mute zone in the representational field, not necessarily because the subject denies it, but mainly because it is partly unconscious. Hence, the non-expressible elements can only be underlined by applying a special technique, such as substitution, used for the first time by Flament (1999) and then taken over by other researchers who studied this dimension of representation.

On principle, we will omit from our analysis the items discussed in the paragraph dedicated to the explicit elements in the SR concerning individuals with special needs, but we will take into account the context of their emerged.

| Central core<br>(the standard instructions) | Central core<br>(the substitution instructions) |
|---|---|
| Help  | Help  |
| Ill   | Ill   |
| Deficiency                                  | Deficiency                                      |
| Different                                   | Handicapped                                     |
| Disabilities                                | Indifference                                    |
| Empathy                                     | Compassion                                      |
| Handicapped                                 | Helpless  |
| Marginalisation                             | Rejection                                       |
| Compassion                                  | Stupid/Retarded                                 |
| Issues                                      | Poor  |
| Mental issues                               |   |

Table 1: Elements of the central core in the SR concerning the disabled persons (standard and substitution instructions)

We observe that the four first terms that emerged in the substitution conditions – *help*, *ill*, *deficiency*, *handicapped* – are the same as those that emerged in “normal” conditions. We can presume that the displacement of the term *indifference* within the peripheral system of representation (the standard instructions) to the central core (the substitution instructions) diagnoses the existence of a non-empathic and passive behavioural model that functions in society. To what extent this behaviour is also practiced by the subjects themselves, is something we were able to determine through interviews focused on this issue. In principle, we believe the subjects do not exclude themselves completely from the category of those who use this behavioural model, if we take into account the other elements identified within the mute zone in the representation, such as *stupid/retarded*, *helpless*, whose presence is an indicator of a counter-normative attitude. The term *indifference* is in balance with *compassion*, an element also highlighted through the standard instructions, which proves the constancy and consistency of the affective component in the SR concerning disabled persons.

The item *helpless* is not part of the explicit content of the social representation regarding persons with special needs, but it was only activated in the substitution situation. The high polysemantism of the term does tend to focus on the negative side. On one hand, the term covers ideas, such as “lack of help, of support, or of defence” (phrases with a relatively frequent occurrence in the general corpus of words obtained after the research). Hence, it refers to someone who cannot defend himself/herself from the

(discriminating) attitude of others, who has a hard time accomplishing daily tasks without getting support from others. Another meaning of the word *helpless*, “with no possibilities, no material resources”, consolidates the item *poor*, emerging in the central system when reducing normative pressure. Finally, if we consider the term *helpless* as referring to an individual “who cannot do things by himself/herself, unhandy, inapt”, we see that this is not necessarily the definition of a disabled person. Hence, the existence of this meaning could appear as a reflex of the stereotype that the disabled person cannot reach the qualitative performances of the “normal” majority. The functional dependence on others, which does not set a very favourable light on the disabled persons, is one of the causes of the *helpless* label. Actually, disabled people who exercise or who manage to solve things independently are considered much more independent even more than “normal” persons, due, of course, to an over-valorising process resulted from the comparison with the general image within the society.

The term *rejection* also displaces, from the peripheral system of the SR concerning persons with special needs (in the standard instructions) to the central system (in a substitution situation); it is semantically polarised between the meaning of “refusal”, where it is in consonance with the term *indifference* (in a unilateral relation from the majority population and toward the discriminated *out-group*). On the other hand, the meaning refers to the way in which the disabled persons themselves get distanced from the community, either through isolation or by rejecting the contacts and communication attempts initiated by the others. Finally, the double term *stupid/retarded* registers an important frequency within the categories used to calculate the data based on Vergès’ table. We chose the doubling variant because the realities to which the two terms refer, though they partially overlap, do not identify with each other. Defined as “lacking intelligence, mind; simple person; naïve; without knowledge” (DEX [Romanian Explicative Dictionary], s.v.), the word *stupid* seems to refer mostly to a low cognitive standard, while *retarded* (“undeveloped from the intellectual perspective; with a delay; mentally retarded”, DEX, s.v.) mostly defines a slowness/stagnation in intellectual development. Such an image associated to the persons with special needs is connected to the reduced capacity of mentally disabled persons to face the daily demands and, mostly, their rather high visibility. Hence, the way in which persons with mental disabilities are seen leads to a deformed perception, through irradiation, of all disabled persons as being mostly characterized by mental retardation, or by being simple, naïve, and ignorant, mostly considering that many of them are not part of any kind of education

*First periphery of the SR concerning disabled persons (the substitution indications)*

| <b>First periphery</b><br>(the standard instructions) | <b>First periphery</b><br>(the substitution instructions) |
|---|---|
| Disadvantaged   | Abnormal  |
| Difficult   | Discrimination  |
| Discrimination  | Disabilities  |
| Care  | Care  |
| Integration   | Physical issues   |
| Special needs   | Medical issues  |
| Normal  | Respect   |
| Friendship  | Sadness   |
| Problems with movement                                | Humiliation   |
| Power   |   |
| Will  |   |

*Table 2:* Elements of the first periphery of the SR concerning disabled persons (standard instructions and substitution instructions)

Being in the same zone of the representational field, both in the standard instructions and in the substitution instructions, the terms *discrimination* and *care* occupy a space of social interaction, between comprehensive behaviour (*care*) and exclusive behaviour (*discrimination*).

Some terms that, through substitution instructions, are in the first periphery of the SR, have also been identified in the standard experimental situation; it should be mentioned that they are placed in other zones of the representational field. This way, *disabilities*, after being part of the central system, passed to the periphery of representation, while the item *sadness* has migrated from the category of contrastive elements to the first periphery.

Through the item *abnormal*, the subjects identify within the polymorphic *out-group* an invariant, consisting of a gap (“physical or mental infirmities”) from the “common” axis. The term, used euphemistically to avoid tougher synonyms, still has a highly unfavourable connotation, thus situating the disabled persons outside a normalcy standard.

In the substitution instructions, within the affective component of the representational field, one can find the elements *sadness* and *humiliation*, which condition each other. The distinction between offensive action and its subjective reception organizes the semantic universe of the term between the meaning “humiliating situation imposed on someone, a humiliating word or action; offence” (DEX, s.v.), where the representative of the majority are

agents, and the meaning of “feeling of inferiority; the attitude is provoked by such a feeling” (DEX, s.v.), such as a natural reaction to the discriminatory behaviour. Explicit humiliation is not necessarily the most frequent form of manifestation. It is sometimes exceeded in intensity and in frequency, for instance, by the restrictive conditions of access to the most common service, cases where even children (without disabilities) can handle things: the access to means of transportation or access to the elevator push buttons, or the access of a person in wheelchair to an ATM machine, not to mention payments for various service providers, etc. Even where special access ways seem to have been installed, they usually do not respect any rule, and they are only made to be made. Hence, at any given moment, these persons have to ask for help in order to get in or out of transportation means, in order to get to an office or to use the restroom of a restaurant, because there are special restrooms only in very few locations.

Though it appears to positively polarize the structure of the SR, the term *respect* can also be considered by taking into account the context where it appears next to *humiliation*, *discrimination*, *abnormal*, etc., especially as a need to respect (or maybe as an absence of respect) disabled persons.

*Contrastive elements of the SR concerning persons with special needs (the substitution instructions)*

| <b>Contrastive elements</b><br>(the standard instructions) | <b>Contrastive elements</b><br>(the substitution instructions) |
|--|--|
| Bad luck   | Different  |
| Maladjustment  | Fear   |
| Incapable  | Maladjustment  |
| Introverted  | Integration  |
| Isolation  | Isolation  |
| Physical issues  | Marginalisation  |
| Medical issues   | Issues   |
| Poor   | Mental issues  |
| Wheelchair   | Rejection  |
| Pain   | Pain   |
| Sadness  |  |

*Table 3: Contrastive elements of the SR concerning disabled persons (standard instructions and substitution instructions)*

Some of the terms activated through the substitution instructions repeat, largely the elements of social representation regarding the person with special needs, as it appears in the common experimental situation. Moreover, a part of them conserve including the position within the same quadrant of Vergès’ table, and the subjects go through *maladjustment*,

*isolation, pain* – a constancy that makes these terms more important, thus attesting their consistency within social representation.

Other elements within the representational field have changed their place, in the substitution instructions, “migrating” in the area of the contrastive elements within other quadrants of the table: *different, marginalisation, rejection, issues*, and *mental issues* and, on the other hand, *integration*, the only element with a positive valorisation. The presence of these terms confirms the above-launched idea regarding the existence of a single social representation, comprising the explicit, expressible elements in all social situations, as well as elements with a restricted update but which are available in the representational field and can be activated through strategies of reducing normative pressure.

A new element, which does not appear in “normal” experimental conditions, is the term *fear*. Why would the subjects feel fear concerning disabled persons, mostly that the social representation that holds them as object includes terms, such as *incapable, retarded* and, mostly, *helpless*? We believe that we will find an answer to this question by using a fundamental text of social psychology, published over two decades ago (Jodelet, 1989); it was one of the first works in the field of social representations and the first to have treated social representation regarding a deficiency. The French researcher showed that many of the research participants manifested a genuine phobia concerning the mentally disabled persons and – despite all the statements of the physicians – they believed mental disease to be transmissible. For instance, in order to make sure that they would not get the disease, the subjects, from a rural background and who took care of mentally disabled persons within their family according to the French system, offered their own tableware to the “retired” persons. Noting the existence of taboos manifested by the refusal to talk to mentally disabled persons or even by refusing to look at them, Denise Jodelet believes that these behaviours are due to “reminiscences of magical beliefs concerning mentally disabled persons” (Jodelet, 1989, p. 236). Our research seems to confirm this direction of analysis, if we take into account that the frequent activation of utterances such as “God forbid!”, “God help us!”, “God help him!” decisively includes the disability phenomenon in line with magical-religious thinking that implies the appeal to divine protection.

A series of contemporary research approach the issue of *fear* from another perspective - violence and uncontrolled impulsivity potential that “normal” individuals ascribe to (mostly mentally) disabled persons. Hence, the opinion expressed within a study on the stereotypy and on the attitudes toward people with mental issues in Romania (Stănculescu [ed.], 2008) was a rather negative one, from the perspective of both professionals and the general population. Specialized literature shows that a central aspect of the

stereotypes regarding persons with mental issues is related to a perceived aggressiveness risk. Actually, a study from the Research Institute for the Quality of Life conducted with professionals in the field, as well as the qualitative study, identifies the stereotype “crazy people are aggressive, violent” as one of the most widespread negative stereotypes regarding persons with mental issues.

In order to test to what degree the population perceives a risk of violence from the part of these persons, the following question was used: In your opinion, how likely is it for John/Mary to be violent with other persons? The answers ranged on a scale from “highly unlikely” to “highly likely”. Among those who expect violence (“likely” or “highly likely”), most (62%) expect physical and verbal violence, 31% only verbal violence, and the rest, 7% only physical violence. The only significant differences are related to regional culture. Compared to the rest of the country, significantly more people expect verbal violence in Walachia, while in Banat they expect physical violence and in Crișana-Maramureș, both physical and verbal violence (Stănculescu [ed.], 2008, p. 298). However, it is also worth mentioning that the term *fear* may have also referred – through a change of perspective – to the feelings of the disabled persons toward the general population. More precisely, we are discussing here about a possible feeling of generalised anxiety manifested by these persons who have contact with the general population, a *fear* most probably due to the way in which they are treated during the interaction. As we have already mentioned, rejection and marginalisation are not always visible through manifest behaviours; most often, a “patronising” look, a gesture, a remark are sufficient for a disabled person, who often deals with such situations, to feel anxiety.

In conclusion, fear – as an affective element of the mute zone in social representation regarding persons with special needs in Romania – is an important factor, regardless of the manifested meaning, because it generates a state of anxiety with negative effects in the way disabled persons are perceived, thus generating, most of the time, a stereotypical answer from both parts of the social categories.

*The second periphery of the SR concerning persons with special needs (the substitution instructions)*

| <b>The second periphery</b><br>(the standard instructions) | <b>The second periphery</b><br>(the substitution instructions) |
|--|--|
| Complexes  | Mockery  |
| Courage  | Specialized centres  |
| Dependence   | Freaky   |
| Indifference   | Courage  |
| Infirmity  | Disadvantaged  |
| Limited  | Empathy  |
| Communication  | Bad luck   |
| issues   | Introverted  |
| Rejection  | Wheelchair   |
| Retarded   |  |

*Table 4:* Elements of the second periphery of the SR concerning disabled persons (standard instructions and substitution instructions)

Within the second periphery of the social representation regarding persons with special needs, there was only one term activated, in conditions of normal instructions, in the same area of the SR concerning persons with special needs, and that is *courage*. For the rest, the common terms activated in both experimental situations were originally redistributed.

Hence, the positive dimension groups' terms, such as: specialized centres, courage, empathy, which cover different zones of representation, from the comprehensive side (empathy), passing through the conclusive-descriptive aspect (courage) – admiration of the majority and resort of self-supportive behaviour – to the action dimension (specialized centres). All these elements demonstrate that the subjects have access to good practice models and that they also have assimilated them to a certain extent.

Introverted, wheelchair and bad luck are terms that “slipped” from the zone of the contrastive elements of social representation regarding persons with special needs (in conditions of “normal” instructions) to the level of the second periphery. This is why we conclude that these are elements with low evocation in the field of social representation.

Regarding the term mockery, this is an eloquent example not only for the stigmatising judgments and beliefs of the general population but also for their application within the interactions with disabled persons. This item indicates, in our opinion, an awareness of these counter-normative behaviours, which could only be activated in the situation of experimental manipulation. This allowed the participants not to express themselves on

their own behalf (we bring the discussion to this area because this item did not appear in the standard experimental indications).

In its turn, the term freaky brings to the foreground another negative stereotype resulted from the confrontation of the majority group with the image of the Other (see the categorization theory of Tajfel, 1972, 1974, 1981, 1982). Though we find here a part of the meanings associated with the term different, of which we discussed in the section dedicated to the social representation regarding persons with special needs (“normal” instructions), this item presents other associated meanings, which indicate a semantic extension toward the idea of “strange, bizarre” (DEX, s.v.), which place the disabled person in a zone dominated by shocking, contradicting elements. Actually, throughout time, many persons with disabilities used to be exposed during fairs, where the curious public paid to watch them. The morbid attraction for the subject can be a reminiscence of the past, though nowadays the curiosity of the population seems to be related mostly to the way in which these persons manage to “get things done” in daily life; actually the media has been presenting them mostly from this perspective.

As for the item frustration, we have to mention that it is practically impossible for a disabled person not to develop a strong resistance to frustration; otherwise, it would be much harder to go on every day. Frustrating elements are everywhere, and a great part of them is included in the SR field (and they take extreme forms, from indifference and isolation, to rejection, marginalisation and mockery).

Revealed through substitution techniques, the hidden counter-normative aspects that make up the mute zone of the SR could actually be found somewhere at the lower limit of the conscious. Hence, the subjects could manage to identify them at the others as elements of a stigmatising discourse, but they could very well not be aware of them when it comes to themselves.

#### *Comparison between the substitution categories in the research of the mute zone in the SR concerning persons with special needs in Romania*

In order to underline the mute zone of the social representation, we have used substitution, one of the experimental techniques used within the studies meant to underline certain elements of the SR that usually remain hidden, as they are socially undesirable. As we have tried to show how – or to what extent – each of the experimental variables proposed influenced the results obtained within the experiment, we decided to compare the data obtained through each of the three substitution levels used in order to underline the mute zone in the representation (students in general, Romanians in general, and EU citizens). Secondly, the purpose was to

outline the convergence points and – insofar as they exist – the distinct aspects related to the elements obtained through the standard instructions.

Through the substitution instructions, the participants no longer have to express on their own behalf, but on behalf of the members of their community, seen as three concentric circles – from the small group (students in general) to the larger group (Romanians in general, then EU citizens) –, which has as a result the reduction of the degree of subjective implication and the increase in the possibility of activating counter-normative beliefs and judgments regarding the disabled person. This method – used in combination with the free association method – will allow for the revelation of certain pertinent information regarding the way of thinking of the subject in “normal” conditions and, very likely, the identification of the influences manifested by the entourage, both the close one (family, friends) and the larger one (colleagues, acquaintances, etc.).

Hence, this experimental manipulation comprises a consistent amount of social representation elements coinciding with those in the standard instructions, but also originality points that do not represent, actually, but aspects available in the representational field, whose expression in normal social situations is inconvenient. We cannot omit that – in this case. The structure of the social representation is somewhat different, but could this new organization show a tendency of outlining another social representation? The answer is definitely negative, because we cannot ignore that – within the above-announced theory in the study of the mute zone in social representation regarding disabled persons – the general elements within the application of standard instructions are generally the same, and differences concern only those terms of their distribution.

This part of the experiment is actually almost an independent study, through which we wish to highlight the way in which the application of an experimental technique, such as the reduction of normative pressure (in our case, the three-level substitution), has contributed to outlining the mute zone in social representation regarding persons with special needs in Romania. From this perspective, we elaborated an experimental situation for each substitution level (students in general, Romanians in general, EU citizens) and we replicated the table of Vergès for each experimental variable in order to discuss by comparison the data obtained.

#### *The first substitution level: students in general*

By focusing on the first substitution levels (students in general), we notice here the presence of certain terms activated in the central core of the general experimental situation of manipulation (help, handicapped, indifference, helpless), but also of certain terms activated in the standard situation of data collection (disabilities, handicapped, marginalisation,

mental issues). This brings more arguments for the force of the terms in the central system, as they maintain their position regarding the importance and frequency ascribed by the subjects, despite the experimental manipulation.

Finally, for this substitution level, only one term (that was not visible in the central system used for comparison) abnormal, was reiterated. A counter-normative label for the minority group, the term appears as a euphemism compared to harsher synonyms. Nevertheless, given that it serves to mark a difference between us and the others based on the dichotomy healthy-ill or complete-incomplete and that it determines an unjust connection between normalcy and bodily wholeness (or functioning “within normal parameters”), contrarily to the dependence on the help of others, it places the person with disabilities outside the standard of normalcy.

*The second substitution level: Romanians in general*

By focusing the discussion on the elements activated in the central system for the second substitution level (Romanians in general), we noticed the same (obviously partial) coincidences with terms found in the central core of the mute zone in the representation for the substitution instructions in general (indifference, incapable, stupid/retarded, etc.), as well as elements that appear within of the central system of social representation regarding persons with special needs in Romania, in the conditions of “normal” instructions (help, ill, handicapped, compassion, etc.).

The “new” terms here are mockery and incapable, elements also found in the standard experimental situation (incapable), as well as in the situation of experimental manipulation in general (mockery) within the peripheral system. As it belongs to the behavioural component of representation (Abric, 1997), the term mockery indicates – through the displacement from the peripheral system to the central one – an awareness of this counter-normative behaviour. The permanent presence of the term in the representational field for the substitution instructions represents an indicator of the fatalist reception of proper behaviour as “normal” in the relationship with disabled persons.

Bearing an intense negative connotation, the term incapable covers very strong counter-normative beliefs (given that they are also present in the standard instructions, where the subject is usually very careful not to transgress the social norm), materialised in the expressed reserve that the disabled persons cannot reach the performances of the majority. While – in conditions of standard instructions, but also in the general experimental substitution situation (the mute zone, as it results from all substitution levels) – the item incapable appears as a peripheral element of representation, in this case the term augments the force of the item stupid/retarded. Actually, it

comes as a “definitive sentence” regarding the capabilities of the disabled persons to react independently to the challenges of the environment.

Regarding the elements activated in the peripheral system for this experimental situation (Romanians in general), it is worth underlining an “invasion” of the terms that highly express unfavourable beliefs and judgements concerning disabled persons. These terms situated on the negative attitude pole are not expressed in the standard situation or in general experimental manipulation. However, when placed in the experimental situation, Romanians in general, the subjects bring to light a very different portrait of the person with special needs, within which the stereotype biases have painted thick and dark hues. Hence, for Romanians, the disabled person appears as crippled/one-legged, which means that the person does not meet the “normal” beauty standards (ugly). These items are in a relation of unidirectional conditioning: a physical deficiency as visible as the lack of limb contradicts the idea of human beauty, based on symmetry and harmony, from the time of Greco-Roman Antiquity. On the other hand, within the process of social identification, the motor handicap is as pertinent of a distinctive mark as gender or race (see, in this sense, Hirschauer-Rohmer, 2002), as the individual finds it easy to compare, this way, himself (the in-group, respectively) with the Other (the out-group, respectively). Actually, in our research, the frequent activation of certain utterances, such as diverse, different – or even “Such a good thing I am not like him!” – eloquently illustrate this process of social comparison.

Actualized exclusively in a substitution situation with the extended in-group, two other highly counter-normative elements (beggar and contempt) refer to extremely negative beliefs and judgments regarding the disabled person who, by taking advantage of his/her physiological issues or limitations, would depend exclusively (and humiliatingly) on the support of others (beggar), thus generating contempt. In this case, we easily recognize the presence or masked (Guimelli, 2003) or non-expressible elements (Abric, 2003) in common social situations; the substitution instructions have allowed them to become known, thus confirming the theories of the mute zone in the representation and in the Romanian space.

#### *The third substitution level: EU citizens*

In regard to the third experimental situation (EU citizens), which we introduced within the research in order to eliminate any “autochthonous” influence and in order to follow the evolution of the social representation when related to a foreign model, it activates more terms which are different than the other substitution levels. It also brings alteration to the general connotation of the central system, such as positive judgments predominate in this case.

In this experimental situation, we find two common terms with the mute zone in the representation, as it was outlined from the sum of all the manipulation conditions, and with the social representation in the standard situation, implicitly. These terms are help and compassion, and they are among the few terms that belong to the central core of social representation with positive or even neutral connotations (as in the case of compassion), by the panel of experts.

The rest of the items that make up the central system (equality, integration, understanding and respect) are terms with such of a string positive connotations, that they manage to provide – through irradiation – a positive connotation to the entire central core. By extension, within this experimental situation, a favourable field of the SR, mainly concerning disabled person was outlined, which is an important argument to support the experimental hypothesis through which we were presuming the formation of a positive model in this case. Practically, placing the subject on the third substitution level supposes taking such a great distance from the concrete situation in Romania, that the subject sends up relating to some kind of an ideal, mostly given that the models started arriving during the pre-adhering period and that they keep on coming from the European Union.

The interesting fact is that we find here, on the level of the first periphery, terms activated both in the general manipulation condition and in the standard instructions (different, disabilities, helpless), terms whose potentially negative meaning is “tempered” by the positive pressure from the other terms composing the quadrant of the first periphery, protection and socialisation. If protection supposes an extension and a diversification of the services provided under the “umbrella” of social protection, to also include other elements besides a pension for the disabled, the item socialisation brings to the foreground the idea of augmenting the services meant to favour better social integration of the persons with special needs.

In regard to the zone of the contrastive elements, it contains, besides the term issues (with a negative, but also somehow conclusive connotation), only positive terms, among which some are not found in any of the previous experimental situations. We mention here acceptance, communication, rights and normal, terms which form an image close to the ideal regarding disabled persons. This vision on the persons with special needs is so favourable that it makes us think of rather the opposite, in the sense that – for this substitution level (EU citizens) – the subjects relate rather to a situation that constitutes an intensely antagonistic correlative for the condition of the disabled person in Romania.

In the same line, we remark the presence of certain terms (social work, specialized centres and specialists) that refer to a proactive dimension, of a sustained implication from the part of State institutions. This

intervention is meant to stimulate the persons with special needs in order to give up isolation in the favour of certain activities to turn them into active citizens within their community, which will lead, in time, to a change in the way in which the others perceive them.

The second periphery of the representational field has very different elements compared to the other experimental situations. The connotation of the terms leads to a valorisation of disabled persons, and we find here terms with an intense affective value (*affection, attention, tolerance*), as well as items related to character traits (*ambition*), situated in a rather atypical zone of the SR, which make up the image of a non-dependent person with disabilities, able to go beyond his/her limitations. The proactive component is also well represented, being materialised in items, such as *support* (as human implication, of the community), *adjusted transportation* (as intervention of the authority) or *adaptation* (as individual effort from the part of disabled persons).

By following the way in which each of the three experimental situations influences the activation of the counter-normative elements, which make up the mute zone of the social representation regarding disabled persons in Romania, we see that, in the case of the first two substitution levels, we obtained results similar to the general and to the standard experimental situation. This means that their combined influence has been, indeed, remarkable.

If, in the standard instructions, the subjects expressed cognitions and judgments that make up an equal, balanced overall image of the disabled person in Romania (which does not exclude a polarisation of the elements into a positive and a negative zone), once they were stimulated to distance themselves from the non-discriminatory social norm, they changed the register. Hence, the answers obtained could be considered part of a rather unfavourable perspective. The maximum negative limit is reached through the elements activated within the substitution instructions concerning Romanians in general. From this standpoint, these elements are situated on opposed positions compared to the situation resulted by using the third substitution level. An explanation would be that the subjects define their social identity in contrast to the large in-group, as they feel superior to it.

A sensibly more valorising perspective appears in the substitution situation with the students in general; the participants identify themselves with this social group, and they consider it more tolerant. Hence, the subjects seem to project this group – characterized by the smallest social distance (and the situation cannot reduce enough of the norm pressure!) – as the depositary of a more advanced social attitude, more in line with the good European practices.

Regarding the last substitution level (EU citizens) that we introduced in the experimental situation, we observe that its contribution within the representational field is mainly valorising. Hence, we find the question legitimate if, in this case, maybe we are talking about another social representation, meaning the social representation regarding disabled persons in the European Union. In order to solve the dilemma, we have to take into account the factor “participants to the study”, who have inevitably brought their own perspective on the subject, probably different from that of certain potential subjects in the European Union. On the other hand, this experimental situation allows the subjects to distance themselves from the situation in Romania and to relate – in terms of contrast – to the situation of the disabled persons in the European Union.

*Statistical analysis of the central elements in the SR concerning persons with special needs in Romania*

For the entire research, the distribution of the central elements in the social representation regarding persons with special needs within the population is a relevant factor, which facilitates a better understanding of the phenomenon and an emphasis on the subjacent factors that contributed to the formation of this social representation. Considering the idea launched in the theoretical part of the paper, according to which the stereotypical elements overlap, more or less, the elements of the central system, we looked for a research strategy to connect the two categories of data. In this sense, we have to take into account that the first are relevant for the individual analysis, while the latter are relevant for the analysis on groups/collectives.

We have been wondering to what extent do some subjects have the capacity of uttering more words that are part of the semantic categories belonging to the central core (the quadrant 1), while others, with a somewhat atypical representation, used words associated with other categories than the central ones? To the same extent, we have been interested in identifying statistically significant differences between those who utter more “stereotypical” words and those who do not utter such words or who utter few such words.

In order to underline the distribution of the stereotypical elements (which we consider as belonging to the central core of the SR) within the experimental sample, we constructed a variable that contains the repartition and “stereotypical” word frequency for each subject. On principle, according to the research methodology, each subject could have uttered between 0 and 5 “stereotypical” words as answer to the technique of associated words. Though this variable, registered values ranging from 0 to 5, there have actually been very few situations where the subjects emitted 5 words and relatively few situations where a subject uttered 4 words belonging to the categories of the central core. In order to analyze the impact of this variable,

we analyzed (through repeated measurements, first through the T test for paired variables and then through one-way ANOVA) the differences in the distribution of stereotypical words depending on the variables faculty and gender for both the standard situation and the substitution one. For the variable faculty we obtained  $F = 3.992$ , where  $p = 0.008$ , in the substitution situation, which shows that there are significant differences in the occurrence of the words belonging to the central category of the SR, depending on the variable faculty. In other words, there are significant deviations in the number of stereotypical words uttered by the students of the four faculties, considering a “normal”, theoretical distribution of these data.

Another analysis conducted with the help of the chi-square method of the crosstabs menu was materialized through a series of tables that indicate the differences between the percentages of the subjects within each faculty for the variable central word frequency. As it results from the table associated to Figure 1, the students of the Faculty of Construction are the ones who uttered the most words belonging to the central categories of social representation. Of the 207 participants to the research, 2.9% (adjusted residual = 2.2) uttered a number of 5 words belonging to the central categories (all 5 associated words solicited), while 14.5 % (adjusted residual = 1.3) uttered 4 words belonging to the central categories. On the contrary, the students at the Faculty of Letters are those who provided the smallest number of words that could be integrated in the central categories (the quadrant 1); 26.5 % (adjusted residual = 2.6) of them provided only “atypical” words, which cannot be included in the central core. Also in the category of the subjects that provide a small number of “stereotypical” words we included the students at the FEBA: 44.1% of them (adjusted residual = 1.9) provided only one word that could be included in the central categories of the SR.

A possible explanation of the fact the students at the Faculty of Letters provide a small number of words that can be included in the central categories, thus providing an “atypical”/less “stereotypical” SR, can be related to the fact that the students of this faculty have a much richer vocabulary. This allows them to use more words in order to designate the same reality, thus avoiding the trap of stereotypical words.

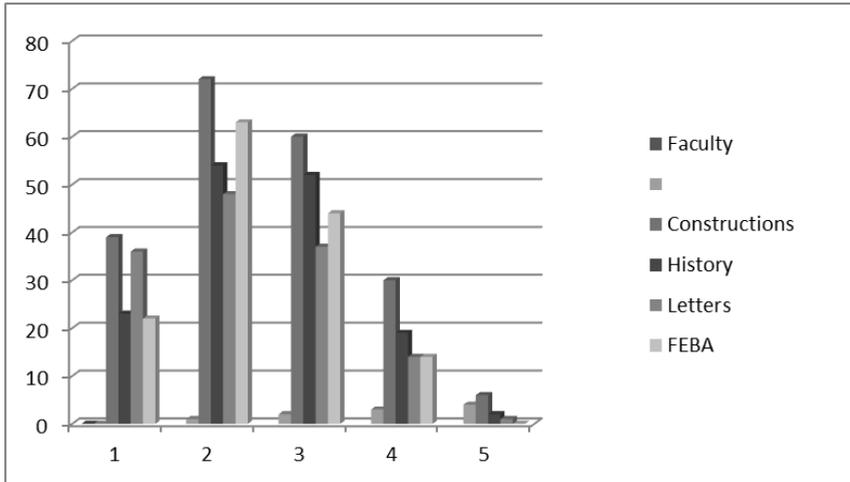


Figure 1: Frequency of stereotypical words of the SR by the variable *faculty* (standard instructions)

| Faculty       | Frequency_CW_SR |     |     |    |   | Total |
|---------------|-----------------|-----|-----|----|---|-------|
|               | 1               | 2   | 3   | 4  | 5 |       |
| Constructions | 39              | 72  | 60  | 30 | 6 | 207   |
| History       | 23              | 54  | 52  | 19 | 2 | 150   |
| Letters       | 36              | 48  | 37  | 14 | 1 | 136   |
| FEBA          | 22              | 63  | 44  | 14 | 0 | 143   |
| <b>Total</b>  | 120             | 237 | 193 | 77 | 9 | 636   |

Table 5: Frequency of stereotypical words of the SR by the variable *faculty* (standard instructions)

We notice, in the experimental substitution situation (the mute zone of the social representation, the table associated to Figure 2) a repartition of the items similar to the standard situation, with some exceptions: the case of two stereotypical words, where the Faculty of Letters drops to second place (36.8 %, adjusted residual = 2.2); the presence of five stereotypical words for two, and then for one subject within the Faculty of Construction and the FEBA. The students from the Faculty of Construction were the most numerous when they had to utter four stereotypical words (5.8 %, adjusted residual = 2.9), thus consolidating the abovementioned idea that they would be more stereotypical than the subjects coming from other faculties

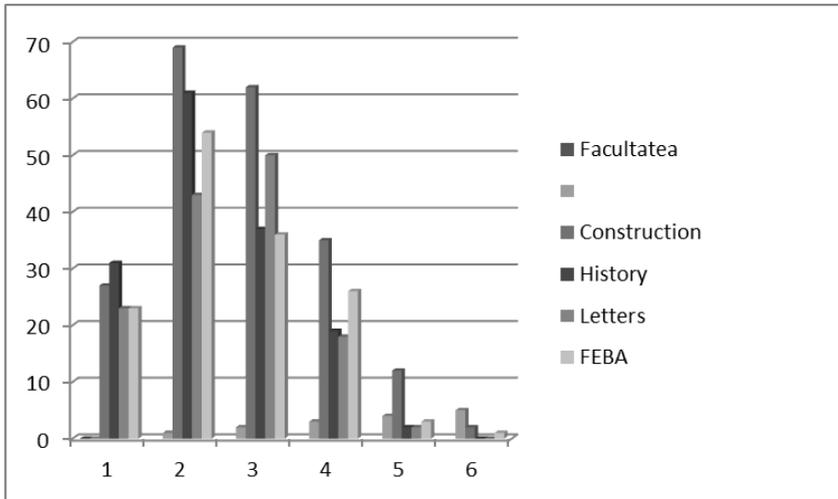


Figure 2: Frequency of stereotypical words of the SR by the variable *faculty* (substitution instructions)

| Faculty      | Frequency_CW_SR |     |     |    |    | Total |
|--------------|-----------------|-----|-----|----|----|-------|
|              | 0               | 1   | 2   | 3  | 4  |       |
| Construction | 27              | 69  | 62  | 35 | 12 | 207   |
| History      | 31              | 61  | 37  | 19 | 2  | 150   |
| Letters      | 23              | 43  | 50  | 18 | 2  | 136   |
| FEBA         | 23              | 54  | 36  | 26 | 3  | 143   |
| Total        | 104             | 227 | 185 | 98 | 19 | 636   |

Table 6: Frequency of stereotypical words of the SR by the variable *faculty* (substitution instructions)

As for the gender differences, some studies advance the idea of certain inner behavioural differences between men and women, by arguing that, in most primitive cultures, hunting and war were usually reserved to men, while women remained at home, took care of the house and raised the children. Hence, such a difference in the social role would legitimize the idea that men are biologically more prone to aggressiveness, while women are more likely to be sensitive and empathic. However, it appears that the level of male aggressiveness is very different from one culture to another, just like the level of female sensitivity and passivity. Furthermore, the fact that one feature is more widespread than another does not prove a certain genetic background, as it could be generated by general cultural factors.

According to other authors, the behavioural differences between men and women occur mainly following the social learning of female and male identity as well as the meaning of femininity or masculinity. An important contribution in this sense is one of primary socialisation, and within it, gender socialisation, which means learning the gender roles through social factors, such as family, along with the help of the media. Regarding the distribution of central words depending on the variable *gender* (the table associated to Figure 3), we pinpointed the presence of certain differences also confirmed through the presence of certain statistically significant results that could partially support the idea of a gender-based difference regarding the use of certain stereotypical words. Hence, it is worth mentioning that the significance threshold was only exceeded in the case of the experimental substitution situation, in favour of the males ( $p = 0.013$ ), most probably because of the experimental manipulation that allowed the subjects to express the counter-normative terms easier.

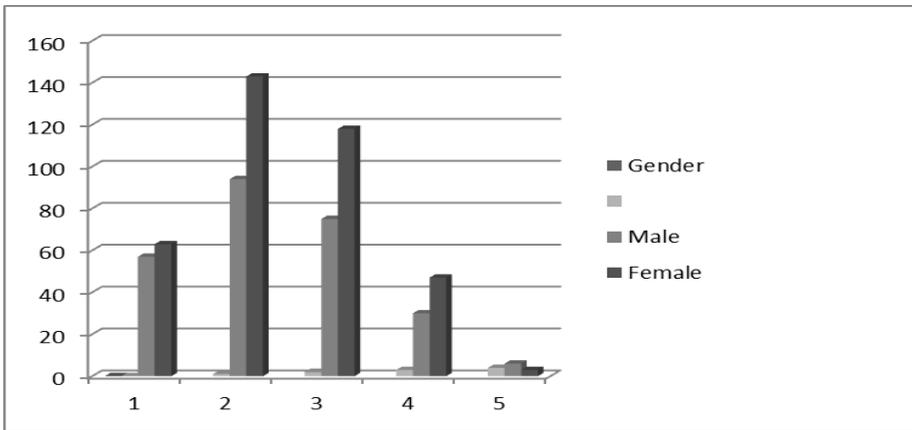


Figure 3: Frequency of stereotypical words of the SR by the variable *gender* (standard instructions)

| Gender | Frequency_CW_SR |     |     |    |   | Total |
|--------|-----------------|-----|-----|----|---|-------|
|        | 0               | 1   | 2   | 3  | 4 |       |
| Male   | 57              | 94  | 75  | 30 | 6 | 262   |
| Female | 63              | 143 | 118 | 47 | 3 | 374   |
| Total  | 120             | 237 | 193 | 77 | 9 | 636   |

Table 7: Frequency of stereotypical words of the SR by the variable *gender*

The situation is quasi-identical also in the case of experimental manipulation (the table associated with Figure 4), which brings an extra argument to support the idea that, here, we are talking about one and the

same social representation. A minor difference appears between the two experimental situations only in the case of two stereotypical words, where the female subjects had a higher percentage over the males (32.1%, *adjusted residual* = 2). However, the general observation is that more central words are emitted by men. (38.5 %, *adjusted residual* = 1.3 and 4.2 %, *adjusted residual* = 1.5), which confirms the above-stated hypotheses:

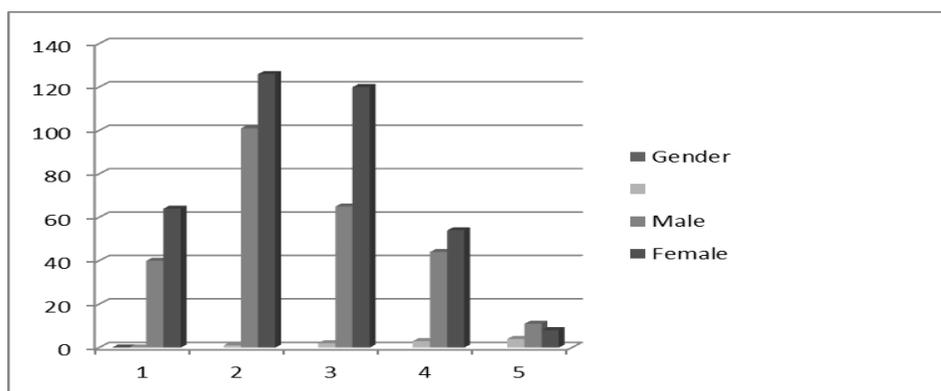


Figure 4: Frequency of stereotypical words of the SR by the variable *gender* (substitution instructions)

| Gender | Frequency_CW_SR |     |     |    |    | Total |
|--------|-----------------|-----|-----|----|----|-------|
|        | 0               | 1   | 2   | 3  | 4  |       |
| Male   | 40              | 101 | 65  | 44 | 11 | 262   |
| Female | 64              | 126 | 120 | 54 | 8  | 374   |
| Total  | 104             | 227 | 185 | 98 | 19 | 636   |

Table 8: Frequency of stereotypical words of the SR by the variable *gender* (substitution instructions)

In order to assess the potential statistically significant differences between the frequency of the centrality of words within the two experimental situations and the experimental variables *gender* and *faculty*, the analysis was repeated by doing a test with repeated measurements (see the statistical annex). The results obtained highlighted a significant difference between the two indicators of centrality  $p < 0.005$ , also statistically underlining the presence of a mute zone of the social representation regarding persons with special needs in Romania.

We also used the paired-samples T test in order to assess the existence of statistically significant differences regarding “stereotypical” word frequency (belonging to the central categories of the SR), uttered by the

students of the four faculties. Within this analysis, in the standard experimental situation, statistically significant differences appeared between the students from Construction and History, on the one hand ( $p=0.014$ ), and the students at the Faculty of Letters, on the other, in the sense that the last provided a smaller number of stereotypical words (see Figure 5). In the substitution experimental situation (the mute zone of the social representation), these differences are statistically significant only between the students at the Faculty of History and those of the Faculty of Letters ( $p=0.011$ ). More precisely, the first provided more words belonging to the central categories, while the latter offered the smallest number of words belonging to the central categories.

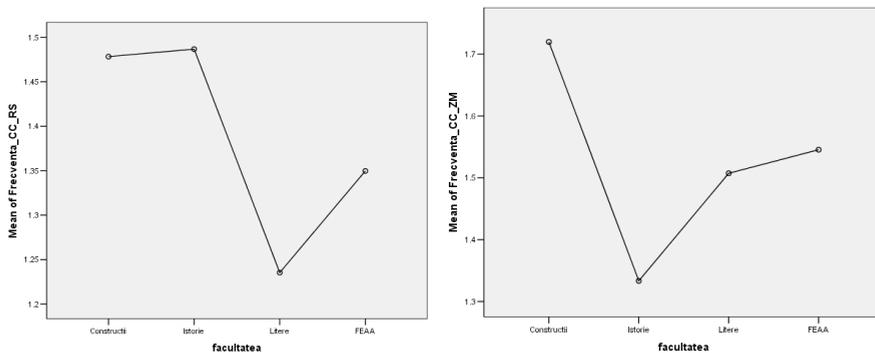


Figure 5: Comparison between faculties depending on *central word frequency*

Another analysis of centrality was conducted to assess the extent to which each central word occupies a different position as frequency depending on the variables faculty and gender. For this analysis, we used the Chi-square test. The comparison of the frequency, registered by the central word handicapped within the variable faculty, demonstrates that this word is more frequent in the case of the students of the FEBA and Construction University (adjusted residual = 3.8, 1.5, respectively, where  $p=0.000$ ). The situation is the same for the students from the Faculties of Construction and Letters (adjusted residual 2.6, 0.1, respectively, where  $p=0.04$ ). This strong stereotypical word had high occurrences, which denotes that it is still largely used by the Romanian society.

Another statistically significant difference for the variable faculty appeared for the central term indifference (adjusted residual = 2.6,  $p = 0.044$ ), also concerning the students of the Faculty of Construction compared to the other faculties.

We also mentioned the presence of statistically significant differences concerning the term different ( $p=0.03$ ) for the variable gender, which

indicates that the female subjects used this term more than the male subjects. A possible explanation would be the attempt to avoid the terms with a negative connotation (*handicapped, abnormal*) by using a term seen as neutral.

Though not all the statistical analyses appeared as statistically significant, we do not believe that it reduces the importance of our study. On the contrary, it shows that the population studied is homogenous, and that the variables researched have a relatively equivalent distribution within the social field.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

We believe that the introduction of a new experimental variable (the substitution level for EU citizens) had positive effects within the social representation studied. First because it made the subjects totally distance themselves from the Romanian psychosocial context; secondly, it instituted a comparison between the situation in Romania and the one in the European Union. There is a value-based opposition between the two, though Romania has been part of the European structures since 2007. Hence, if in the first part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to state their personal opinion regarding one of the inductor terms (standard instructions), in the second experimental condition (substitution instructions), they were given one of the three abovementioned substitution levels, to reduce the normative pressure and to allow the subject to express himself/herself without limitations.

The social representation regarding the person with special needs, as seen in Romania (by the subjects, meaning the students, who were studying to finish their degrees), appears as a heterogeneous set. Though on the positive-negative or favourable-unfavourable axis, the central core seems to be composed of mainly negative elements, the peripheral system intervenes with positively valorised components, thus conferring certain hues to the overall image and balancing to a certain extent the negative predominance of the representation.

Actually, the label different optimally synthesizes the content of the SR concerning the disabled person. Often, labelling diverse the individuals with certain disabilities does not necessarily mean discriminating them outside the majority in-group, but the attempt to find a generalizing name for the distinctive elements that would allow for the identification of the minority group. This element of the central core indicates with precision the rather balanced character of the SR studied here, whose components seem to polarize depending on the positive-negative or favourable-unfavourable coordinates.

At the positive pole, are terms, such as help, empathy, compassion, integration, care, normal, friendship, power, will or courage, organized on the comprehensive dimension (empathy, compassion), open to active and benevolent intervention (help, care, integration), according to the principle of egalitarianism (normal) and of cordial acceptance (friendship) or on the character dimension (power, will, courage). In this case, the object of social representation is highly valorised, given the fact that the respondents were very careful to “sit” comfortably in the normative context of the in-group, thus offering to the others a favourable image. Still, we should not absolutely exclude the probability for certain subjects to actually have some positive opinions and judgments regarding disabled persons.

Most elements mentioned do not imply the idea of interaction (except, surprisingly, for the term friendship, which shows the availability for a relationship constructed on the foundation of reciprocity), but they rather refer to unilateralism. As they have a unidirectional character (from the majority toward the disadvantaged minority group), empathy and compassion require the implication of the community (by setting in motion a social mechanism for a change in the mentality); they are in a relative contrast with help, care, integration, for which usually the State is responsible.

At the opposite pole from contempt, which occupies an important place within the entire SR (retarded, incapable, etc.), we find the favourable appreciation of certain character traits (power, will, courage) whose activation is explainable through an attempt to justify the reasons for the proactive attitude of certain persons with disabilities who try to go beyond their limits. For instance, disabled persons who practice a sport or who have a job are highly positively valorised though. For the general population, these aspects are quite ordinary.

At the negative pole, the disabled person appears as an individual who is always ill (ill, medical issues, sadness, pain), who, because of certain issues and physiological limits (deficiency, disabilities, handicapped, infirmity), cannot reach the qualitative action standards of the majority (incapable). The disabled person appears as someone who always has to be assisted, supported, helped by the others and, even worse, whose thinking seems to be severely altered (retarded, mental issues) and different, anyway (different) from that of the other members of society (see supra).

The discriminatory discourse of the members of the society who refer to elements in the negative pole of representation is often built on an ignorance of the concrete situation, as they have had no direct contact with the object of the representation. The fact that some individuals refuse services or rights from some people they do not anything about, but whom they consider inferior given that he/she belongs to a certain group, can be

very frustrating; it can cause much pain and discontent. The use of certain such labels ever since childhood, without being corrected by others, to which we add the lack of parental or school education regarding human rights and the equality of chances, or accepting others, who is different (though there currently are several attempts of inclusive education), inevitably leads to the perpetuation of the discrimination and marginalization of the persons with special needs.

In fact, the phenomenon occurs as follows: if the subject manages to skip the classical processes underlined by social psychology (social comparison, categorisation, activation of stereotypes, etc.), he/she is asked to refer to the person with special needs from the perspective of his/her own experience, and this will happen even on the highest substitution level. At this point, the subject will think of all the situations they had contact with a disabled person or will refer to the disabled persons he/she already knows. We will refer to them in terms of cognitions or, more often, in terms of affects; knowing them will allow us to make up a complex and complete image of the SR field concerning the disabled person. This is why it is important to detail the elements to each quadrant within the table of Vergès, because these details provide the primary elements, the puzzle pieces we will use to make up an image of the persons with special needs, as close as possible to the social reality in society at a certain point in time.

In conclusion, though there are not many points of divergence between the elements highlighted through the standard instructions and those through the substitution instructions, those items that exceeded the statistical significance threshold are important enough. Together with a repositioning of the elements within a new configuration, they demonstrate the importance of studying the mute zone of the social representation regarding disabled persons in Romania.

Anchored in the perceptible reality and targeting a sensitive social object, the social representation regarding disability appears as a valuable research direction for the field of social representations in global terms. The study of the concept outside normal interaction and intersubjectivity conditions does not always provide relevant information. Though the individual reacts and thinks subjectively, he/she constructs the social reality with others. He/she expresses for the others, and communicates through their in-group. Under these circumstances, in order to obtain certain scientifically viable information – by trying to go beyond the natural tendency of “covering up” the stereotypes and the biases – special research methods are required, such as the substitution technique for this research.

*Limits and future directions*

Because the majority of the subjects were students, perhaps it will be useful to extend the research field with a focus on an age-profession-studies level axis, to highlight (to the extent that those differences are significant) if there are differences between subjects in terms of relation with people with disabilities and the acceptance of differences.

Also, we have the intention to replicate this study in an intercultural context, analysing the results in terms of analogies and distinctions in how people with disabilities are perceived in the European context.

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