

## Switching from a National Identity to a European one

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### **Abstract**

*This study aims at showing how, from individual attitudes, a new representation is gradually built and progressively it is shared by many, thus becoming a common social representation. It seeks to do so by analyzing attitudes and social representations of a new social object, first in January and then in February 2002 when the euro became the common currency in France as well as in 11 other countries also belonging to the euro-zone; at this time, the French former national currency could still be used in parallel to the euro; and second, one year later, once the euro was the single currency that should be used in all the various financial transactions occurring in France.*

*Keywords: Enational identity, European identity, territorial belonging, attitudes and social representations, national currency, European currency.*

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## Introduction

What do people understand about their economic environment? Even though most of us are 'naive' participants (Albou, 1984), we are familiar with some aspects of the political world and economic environment; we possess some knowledge and understanding of how they work. What affect could a change in the economic environment have on people? Through the example of the switch to the euro, which has affected the social, economic and political spheres of the euro-countries, this paper aims at showing how the social representation of a new object is be constructed, and how both social representation and attitudes can affect the feeling of belonging. This paper analyses the effect of the introduction of the eurocurrency on participants' perception of Europe over a period of one year.

It is assumed that the feeling of belonging to Europe, along with the impression of being European, might change with the simultaneous issuance of the common European currency in the twelve countries of the euro-zone. It is hypothesized that this perception varies according to several variables, related both to the participants themselves, to their attitude towards the new currency as well as to their degree of familiarity both with the euro and with Europe.

The paper compares attitudes towards the euro and its social representations in January 15th to February 15th 2002 when the euro first became the single currency of the European Monetary Union, and one year later, from January 15th to the end of February 2003. Teenagers (14- to 18-year-olds) were interviewed during these two distinct periods. Data concerning the influence of the euro on the participants' potential feeling of belonging to Europe are also discussed.

## Social representation and attitudes

Social representation expresses the values, norms and attitudes of social groups. The concept is well suited to analyze how a new object, the euro, was perceived once it was introduced as the new currency in the twelve countries of the euro-zone and after one year of practical use of this

currency. As the representation of a social object is the description of how it is perceived, there should be a strong relationship between the social representation of this object and the participant's attitude towards it. This study aims at showing how, from individual attitudes, a new representation is gradually built and progressively it is shared by many, thus becoming a common social representation.

Attitudes tend to influence how one will act towards a specific object, such as the euro, or towards a new situation, such as the switch from a national currency to a new currency. Attitudes are known to be composed of three main structural characteristics: (i) a cognitive one linked to the perception and representation of that object or situation; (ii) an affective dimension related to the emotional aspect(s) in terms of attraction or repulsion towards the object or situation; (iii) an operational characteristic described as a predisposition towards action.

The comparison of samples provides interesting information, based on a description of attitudes and their evolution, and on how a new social representation is being constructed. In studying the general attitude towards the euro in our population, our goal is, on the one hand, to examine the relations between attitudes and social representations, and, on the other, to investigate potential links between them and national (e.g. French identity) versus supranational identity (e.g. European identity).

Initially conceived by Durkheim (1898) at the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of social representation was revived by Moscovici (1961) in his study of psychoanalysis in French society. Social representations are social forms of knowledge, free from scientific constraints and formalized in figurative schemata. They can serve as a basis for perceiving and interpreting reality, as well as for channeling people's behavior. Furthermore, they are related to the social characteristics of people. Empirical evidence shows that, most of the time it is possible to distinguish different social representations corresponding to particular groups, and/or at specific epochs, when specific changes occur. The initial formulation of Moscovici focuses on the genesis of social representations through two major processes: objectification and anchoring. Objectification translates some of the characteristics of an unfamiliar object, such as a new currency, into the terms of our reality. In this process, the individual selects some specific information of that unfamiliar object (this stage is called "selection of information"); with this selected information, the participant reorganizes his/her knowledge ("de-contextualizing"); and is then ready to reconstruct this unfamiliar object into something more familiar (this stage involves a

“reconstruction” into a new schema built with certain specific dimensions.)

Anchoring includes two different aspects: a cognitive aspect according to which the object is integrated into the previous thoughts of individuals; the second aspect is a social one, having to do with a social group giving meaning to a representation. Thus, interpretations of a particular object can differ from one group to another.

Since Moscovici's early work (1961), different theoretical approaches have been developed. One of them considers the cognitive organization of social representations in terms of different kinds of elements: central versus peripheral ones. According to Abric's structural approach (1984), social representations are composed of a central nucleus surrounded by peripheral elements. This theoretical approach, based on a hierarchical structure of representation, was completed by Flament (1981), and as such, deals with the idea of a specific internal structure of the representation. More recently, researchers have been interested in the problem of change in social representations. Guimelli (1989), through a survey about the social representations of hunting, showed that depending on the different social practices of hunters, ecological or traditional practices, it was possible to observe significant differences in the social representations of the two contrasted groups. Flament (1994) and Abric (1994) also argued that social practices were a major factor in the determination of representations in a changing process.

In order to study social representations, various tools can be applied. In this paper, the technique used to identify the elements which are mostly shared in the social representation of a new currency, is an adaptation of Guimelli's technique of selection of blocks of items forming the core of the representation.

## Territorial belonging

One of the purposes of this project was also to explore identity: national identity compared to European identity in terms of feeling of belonging; this is linked to the fact that since the beginning of 2002, with the introduction of a 'single' currency in the euro-zone, Europe has reached a new concrete stage in the process of European integration.

In what way can currencies contribute to a sense of identity? Helleiner

(1998) initially studied this question. Based on insights of 19th- and early 20th-century observers, the author suggests that national currencies might foster national identities. He describes five ways in which the currency can stimulate the feeling of national identity. According to his studies, first the national currency can provide a vehicle for nationalist imagery that constructs a sense of collective tradition and memory; it can also act as a common medium of social communication that may facilitate the 'communicative efficiency' of members of the nation and encourage similar frameworks of thought. By creating collective monetary experiences, it can bolster the feeling of membership in a national community of shared fate. It also contributes, according to Helleiner, to a sense of popular sovereignty if the national currency is managed in a way that corresponds to the people's wishes; and it can strengthen the kind of quasi-religious faith that is associated with nationalism, especially when the currency is managed in a stable manner.

Recent research has addressed issues of monetary integration focusing on the euro. Müller-Peters et al. (1998) demonstrated that, in most countries, attitudes towards the euro are positively correlated with attitudes towards the European Union. Pepermans and Verleye (1998) showed that the latter are also linked to perceptions of national features. The results obtained by van Everdingen and van Raaij (1998) also specify that national identity has indirect effects on attitudes, by influencing expectations about the euro. Meier and Kirchler (1998) reported that opponents, indifferent respondents, and supporters of the euro, are distinguished on the basis of social representations, which may vary in content and structure. More importantly, the difference between opponents and supporters gravitates around preoccupations of national identity, this being directly linked to the feeling of belonging.

In previous studies it appears clearly that, in France, the sense of belonging, which used to be rooted in social classes, has recently been evolving towards a feeling of territorial belonging (Dirm, 1990). In a specific analysis of the European Values Survey, Bréchon (2000) states that, in 1999, the feeling of belonging seemed to be evolving from social belonging to territorial belonging, national and/or infra national (83% of the respondents selected 'town, region, or country'), as well as towards a supra-national (15% selected 'Europe or the world') feeling of belonging. The individual now seems to be faced with the choice of having either a dominant feeling of local territorial belonging, and/or a more global feeling of belonging. Answers to the question concerning geographical belonging

indicate that, as Europe comes into being, its population's potential spatial references are broadening (compared to previous European Values Survey) on account of the geographical mobility induced by professional factors and the growing popularity of traveling abroad. Nevertheless, in 1999, results showed that only 4% of the French interviewees selected Europe as their personal choice in terms of territorial belonging.

Using these recent analyses, completed with specific questions posed to the participants in our samples, the sense of national identity (regional and national) and the feeling of belonging to Europe and/or to the world (supranational), as they appear with the introduction of the euro and one year later, is explored in this paper.

This paper combines various theoretical ideas: an exploration of attitudes to and representations of the euro, both with males and females teenagers. A specific study of the feeling of national identity (feeling of belonging to one's own country) compared to the feeling of being part of Europe, in relation with knowledge about the European Union and about the European Monetary Union, is also carried out.

## Methodology

As already stated, this paper aims at analyzing attitudes and social representations of a new social object, first in January and February 2002 when the euro became the common currency in France as well as in 11 other countries also belonging to the euro-zone; at this time, the French former national currency could still be used in parallel to the euro; and second, one year later, once the euro was the single currency that should be used in all the various financial transactions occurring in France. It was hypothesized that, at the arrival of the euro and after one year, with the increased practical use of the new currency, differences in terms of social representations and attitudes, would be found. It is also assumed that the use of the euro is likely to have an impact on the feeling of belonging to Europe.

A questionnaire was designed to investigate attitudes towards the national currency (French francs) and towards the euro, to study the social representation of the two currencies, and to explore the feeling of territorial belonging. In the first part of the questionnaire, participants' represen-

tations relating to the two currencies were considered. A series of attitude scales were introduced to measure the attitudes towards the euro and Europe. In both studies, during both phases, participants were also asked to identify the countries belonging to the European Monetary Union. Moreover, they were asked if they felt European; they also had to decide where they belong most, by selecting two choices among the five items proposed in the European Values Survey (EVS), thus allowing for the approach of feeling territorial belonging.

### Population and samples for each phase of the two studies

Two samples of teenagers were studied during two periods.

In the first phase, 205 French teenage participants from varied social backgrounds and with a large variety of types and levels of education, were interviewed during this phase, also using a face-to-face questionnaire, half in the Paris area, the other half in the South West of France; this sample was composed of 107 teenage girls and 98 boys (13- to 18-year olds, mean age 14.5). All the teenagers were interviewed in January and February 2002.

In the second phase, 372 French teenage participants from different social backgrounds were selected, a third of the sample was selected in the Paris area while the other two thirds were selected in the South West of France; this sample was composed of an equal number of teenage girls and boys (13- to 18-year- olds, mean age 15.5). All these teenagers were interviewed in January and February 2003.

### Material and procedures

With an adaptation of Guimelli's methodological tool, which involves a selection of provided items (Guimelli, 1989), participants' representations of the euro were tested in both phases. A list of 25 items was presented to the participants; this list was constructed from the words, which had

been often spontaneously produced in an exploratory phase of the study, via a task of free association. This production of terms linked, on the one hand to the national currency, and on the other hand to the euro, was produced by a sample of 50 teenagers, age 14. In this exploratory phase, participants' evocation of terms was analyzed according to Abric's central core hypothesis (1984); Vergés' methodological tools were used to investigate the composition of the social representation (Vergés, 1992), both in terms of frequency and of rank of appearance of the evoked terms. According to this theory, most participants express some of the terms belonging to the shared nucleus; this implies that these will be spontaneously produced by many participants (high frequency); as these terms are important to the group, they will also come to mind early (referred to as low rank). Conversely, the periphery, which takes into account individuality, categorizes terms which are not shared by many and which therefore have a low frequency; the peripheral elements usually appear later and have a higher rank.

On the basis of the exploratory study (Roland-Lévy, 2002), based on spontaneous free associations of terms, it was possible to identify terms, which seemed to be most characteristic of how the participants interviewed might perceive the two currencies. With this task of production of terms, Europe and money appeared to be the elements most often produced for the euro. Other terms appeared in the near periphery; for example, the notion of union which was produced with a low rank. Conversion was also often spontaneously evoked. Quite a few participants associated the euro with the dollar. The fact that life will be easier with a single currency and that it will facilitate international exchange also appeared in the periphery of the representation of the euro. Even though the franc and the euro appear to symbolize different objects, they are clearly linked to the concept of money.

The terms most often spontaneously produced to describe both currencies were used to construct the list of 25 terms to be proposed in the two phases of each study, in order to test the centrality of the above given terms. From the provided list of items, participants had to select the 5 items that, according to them, best characterized the euro (scored + 2), and the 5 that were least characteristic of the euro (scored - 2) then, among the remaining terms, the 5 items that best characterized the euro (scored + 1), and the 5 that were least characteristic of the euro (scored - 1); all remaining items were considered neutral (the score is 0). The same procedure, based on the same list of 25 terms, was also conducted

for the French franc. Participants' representations of the two currencies were analyzed, in both phases, on the basis of the similitude between items and by way of an analysis of the connections among them (cf. Flament, 1981; Vergés, 1992). The goal of this technique is to explore, not only the terms which are most often selected, but also to calculate how terms are related to each other, thus showing the internal structure of the representation. With this technique involving terms chosen as being most characteristic or least characteristic of the given object (here, the euro and/or the French franc), one can also analyze the connections between terms ("connexity") distinguishing the terms which are often selected in pairs, thus strongly linked together, via a score of similarity, and those which are not connected.

In both studies, participants were then asked to rank a series of eleven Likert-type attitude-scales related to the new currency. After conducting a factor analysis seven scales were kept, as they proved to be relatively reliable ( $\alpha = .6590$ .) When the scales were combined, they allowed an overall attitudinal score to be determined, a score thus defining the general tendency -pro-euro (from 3 to 5), anti-euro (from 0 to 2) or neutral- of the attitudes in the samples towards the euro.

In order to test whether the participants felt more French than European, or the other way around, or both French and European, a specific direct open-ended question was asked: 'Do you feel European? Explain how and why'. Participants were also asked to select among the five items proposed in the EVS, their first and second best choices in terms of territorial belonging by answering the question 'Where do you feel you belong most?' selecting among the followings: town, region, country, Europe and/or world.

A content analysis was carried out to categorize the different types of responses. In addition, a list of 20 countries was included – the 12 countries of the European Monetary Union, plus all the other European countries, as well as other countries of the world (e.g. Israel, Turkey, etc.) – in order to test the participants' knowledge of and familiarity with Europe. Participants had to identify, by selecting them, first the countries belonging to the euro-zone, second the new countries that will be joining the euro-zone in the near future.

Personal characteristics (age, gender, schooling, profession, etc.) were also recorded. It took about twenty minutes for participants to complete the different steps of the questionnaire.

## Results

Representations, attitudes and feelings of belonging were compared for each phase. The results obtained are presented for each phase of the study, respectively. Since the samples were chosen to provide participants from diverse backgrounds (and not to be representative of the general population in France), the results obtained are to be taken as an indication of a tendency at the time of both studies, and should not be generalized to the French population.

### Genesis of a social representation

When comparing the representation obtained as the euro was first introduced and one year later, we have to bear in mind the fact that an adaptation of Guimelli's methodological tool was used during each phase and for both studies: participants were presented a list of 25 items and they had to select from this list the terms best/least representative of the franc and the euro.

### Investigation of teenagers' social representation

When analyzing the representations obtained in 2002 and one year later, some overall results appear.

In 2002, soon after the euro was introduced, when looking at the terms which were most often chosen by the teenagers, as closely linked to the euro, from the 25 provided terms, the euro is perceived as the symbol of Europe; it was selected by 69% of the participants as most representative of the euro. The group of 205 teenagers tends to have a shared representation of the euro, focused around four key notions: Europe, money, novelty and union. The last two notions were, a year before, in the periphery instead of in the centre of the representation (cf. Table 1 which shows first for 2002, second for 2003, on the one hand, the terms selected as 'most representative the euro', and, on the other, the terms selected as 'least well representing the euro', all terms being chosen by the participants from the same initial list of terms.)

**Table 1** Percentage of terms selected by teenagers as 'most characteristic of the euro', or as 'least characterizing' it.

Most characteristic	2002	2003	Least characterizing	2002	2003
Europe	69%	49%	Dollar	50%	40%
Union	52%	36%	Complex	45%	36%
New, novelty	41%	35%	Easiness, easy	38%	27%
Notes, coins	38%	19%	France	30%	31%
Money	37%	26%	Conversion	28%	15%

When studying the main items selected as symbols contrasting with the euro, the dollar was chosen by 50% of the participants as not representing the euro; just after came the idea of complexity, which was selected as not linked to the euro by 45% of the sample - whereas it was a central item one year earlier (Roland-Lévy, 2002). On the other hand, the impression of easiness was also chosen by a large proportion of the group as not indicative of the euro (38%). This implies that, for them, the euro is not related to the dollar; it is not complex, or easy.

Concerning the shared representation of the former national currency, it is perceived by the teenage respondents as the national currency, which symbolizes France.

When comparing the results obtained between the two years, 2002 and 2003, very few differences occur, as if the new representation was just crystallizing. In the second phase, when looking at the terms which were most often chosen by the teenagers, as closely linked to the euro, the euro is still obviously perceived as the currency used in Europe. In 2003, the representation of the euro which is shared by the group of teenagers (372 participants) focuses around the idea that the euro is money, composed of new notes and coins, representing a symbol of a unified Europe; it is clearly not perceived as similar to the dollar. Even though it is still not linked to complexity - it is not evidently related to money conversion - it is not a sign of easiness; the euro does not yet characterize France (cf. Table 1.)

## Teenagers' Attitudes towards the euro

Teenagers' attitudes were measured via the average score obtained through the 7 Likert scales<sup>1</sup> put together. The 205 teenagers interviewed while the euro was first being used as the new currency, tend to have a rather neutral overall attitude towards the euro ( $M = 2.7$ )<sup>2</sup> with a small dispersion of answers ( $SD = .74$ ), implying that participants give answers which are not so scattered.

When comparing the attitudes towards the euro between the two phases, the tendency is to have a slightly more positive ( $M = 3.2$ ) attitude in 2003 than in 2002, as if the general attitude towards the euro was just building up along with the practice of a new currency.

## National or Supranational Feeling of Belonging

If we examine the question of the feeling of territorial belonging, during both periods, it is clear that with the introduction of the euro, the responses obtained are extremely different than those obtained in the previous years, before the euro. We should bear in mind that, in 1999, results from the European Values Survey showed that only 4% of the young participants (18 to 25 year olds) selected Europe, and/or the world, as their personal first choice in terms of belonging. When the question 'Do you feel European?' was asked during a previous phase of a similar study in 2001, the tendency of a great majority of young participants (85%) was to agree that, even though they agreed that 'France belongs to Europe' they definitely felt 'French and not European'.

When analyzing the answers to the same open-ended question along with the question related to 'Where do you feel you belong most?' in which two possible answers were to be selected among the followings: town, region, country, Europe and/or world, once the euro was introduced, at the beginning of the year 2002, the answers clearly changed. At that time, a large majority of the teenagers interviewed (77.28%) replied that they were European, since they use the same currency as 'so many' other European countries and people. For the teenage boys and girls of our sample, the concrete introduction and use of the new currency seems to have undeniably influenced their perception of being not only French but also European. No significant difference between boys and girls was found. It

seems that with a single currency in the 12 countries of the euro-zone, both national identity and supranational identity can now co-exist, whereas before, the answers inferred that these two identities could not be activated simultaneously: it had to be one or the other.

After one year of concrete use of the euro, as the single and unique currency in France, 65% of the teenage participants interviewed in 2003, responded that they belong to Europe and they are European. A significant difference (at  $p=.05$ ) between the answers of boys (51% say they feel European) and of girls (79% say they feel European) was found.

This awareness of being European does not imply that the participants have abandoned their national identity or that their feeling of being French has decreased; it only shows that they now also have a feeling of territorial belonging, which includes Europe. In other words, both national identity and supranational identity can now co-exist, whereas, a year earlier, the answers inferred that these two identities could not be activated simultaneously: it had to be one or the other.

As mentioned, a list of 20 countries was included among the questions dealing with Europe. Participants had to circle the 12 countries that belong to the euro-zone. In fact, the average number of countries regarded as being part of the European Monetary Union is ten per participant. There are no difference between the answers for boys and girls. If we classify the countries selected by the 205 teenagers, the results obtained show increasing misinformation, which seems to be directly related to the distance between the countries mentioned and our sample's country of origin: the closer the other countries seem to be, the better the participant's knowledge. In this continuum, France is identified by all the teenagers as belonging to the euro-zone (205); besides France, the first set contains countries sharing common borders with France: we have answers ranging from 100% to 94.6% for Spain (204), Italy (198), Germany (196), and Belgium (194). The second set of countries, identified as belonging to the euro-zone, obtained nearly 90% of answers with the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Portugal. We then have two countries which are a little farther away from the French borders, both of which are mentioned more than 70% answers: Greece and Austria. The fourth group is composed of northern countries, including *Denmark*<sup>3</sup> (52.8%), which precedes Finland, selected by 60% of the participants, and Ireland which was selected by 48%. Then, three countries, belonging to Europe but not yet to the euro-zone were selected: *Norway* by 31.7%, *Sweden* by 24.8%, and the *UK* by 10.7% of the participants. The last set of countries, identified by few participants

as belonging to the European Monetary Union, involves two countries which are applying to join the European Union: *Turkey* which was selected 9.3% of times and *Romania* which was chosen by 6.8% of the participants. Finally, very few participants chose the remaining countries, outside of Europe.

The most remarkable result which appears here is that the French teenagers consulted in this survey are not well informed about the 12 countries belonging to the euro-zone; they are not even certain of the countries belonging to Europe as some participants even selected countries outside the European Union.

## Conclusion

The construction of the social representation of a new object was studied in parallel with the social representation of a well-known social object, the (former) national currency. During the phase of transition between the French franc and the euro, interviewed participants have selected information related to the French franc in order to reorganize their knowledge about the new currency (“de-contextualizing”); the representation of the euro was focused around the idea of a shared symbol of Europe, and they shared representation of the euro fixed around three key notions Europe, novelty and community. This representation goes along with a positive attitude towards the euro. In the second phase, the representation of the euro tends to terminate the process of objectification by reconstructing the initially unfamiliar object into something more familiar. The terms selected now clearly describe the euro as the new currency for the European Community. In 2003, the overall attitude is globally slightly more positive in 2003 than in 2002, as if their general attitude towards the euro was building up along with the practice of a new currency. An interesting comparison with adults can be found in Roland-Lévy (2004).

As predicted by the anchoring processes, the cognitive aspect involves the integration of a new object into the previous thoughts of individuals (the euro is perceived as money in a similar way as the French franc); the social aspect involves the production by a social group (here, teenagers) of a specific meaning for a representation (the new awareness of being part of Europe.) These two aspects, combined with the selection of infor-

mation (money and novelty), de-contextualizing (Europe instead of France), and later reconstruction (euro is money for Europe, thus bringing unity and/or community), allow a shared representation of the euro to be formed around the idea that the euro is a European currency in the Monetary Union.

From the data presented in this paper, it can be concluded that, via the example of the introduction of a single currency at the same time in the 12 countries belonging to the European Monetary Union, this important economic and political change has produced a specific fundamental modification, producing a much broader feeling of territorial belonging.

It is noteworthy that these modifications have already started to affect the feeling of territorial belonging. The concrete use of the single currency has clearly turned the participant's previously exclusive feeling of belonging, a national one, into an entirely new inclusive one, combining a national identity and a supranational identity. While 85% responded that they clearly felt French in 2001, 80% stated that they also belonged to Europe in 2002. In 2003, the percentage is somewhat weaker. They have not abandoned their national identity, or their feeling of being French, but they now also have a significant awareness of being European. With the introduction of the euro, our participants (who were not the same participants, but the samples were constituted on the same basis) have clearly enlarged their conception of territorial belonging. The difference is striking between 2001 and 2002. This fundamental change, as if the introduction of a single currency could really modify, in such a brief period, the conception of the feeling of belonging is not as strong in 2003.

This major change in the feeling of territorial belonging with the introduction of the euro, that is to say the switching from a unique national identity to a combination of a national one and a supranational feeling of belonging, needs to be further verified, as the novelty of the currency may have triggered a new feeling of belonging which may have been somewhat temporary; this could be especially interesting to test just before new countries will join Europe and a year later.

## Endnotes

1. The 7 items kept in both phases.
2. 0 being the most negative score, 5 being the most positive.
3. Italics are used here and later to indicate countries which are not members of the euro-zone.

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