

## Social Representations of Organ Donors and Non-donors

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### ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates the empirical investigation of social representations by means of photographs as stimulus material and the technique of correspondence analysis to study the resulting data. The research was part of a campaign carried out to promote organ donation in Malta. The study tries to find out whether a public communication campaign could change perceptions. Five focus groups were held before the campaign and another five, two months after the campaign. Part of the data collected through these focus groups was analysed using correspondence analysis. The results showed that before the campaign, donors were generally perceived to be either young or important people or public personalities. After the campaign, donors were perceived more to be ordinary family people, educated, generous and religious. On the other hand, before the campaign, non-donors were seen as conservative, uncouth and uncaring, whereas after the campaign non-donors were generally perceived to be older, uninformed and uneducated people. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

*Key words:* social representations; organ donors; correspondence analysis; public communication campaigns

### INTRODUCTION

Many researchers working in the area of attitude and behaviour change through public communication campaigns have argued that the first step in bringing about a change in social ideas and behaviour should be the understanding of the widespread beliefs, attitudes and values of the target audience (for example, Manoff, 1985; Dervin, 1989; Kotler & Andreason, 1996). Members of a community do not form and change their opinions suddenly or independently of each other. Changes in perceptions are the result of a gradual interplay between a change of personal beliefs and a change in social representations. This is important for campaigners and change agents to understand when they are engineering a

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change in how members of a society or a particular community perceive an issue. This paper analyses the change in perceptions which focus group participants experienced after an intensive national campaign aimed at promoting organ donation.

Farr (1990, 1993) points out that the theory of social representations is highly relevant to the study of social change, including changes in public opinion. He explains, for example, how Herzlich's (1973) study on health and illness sheds light on why campaigns designed to increase the fluoride levels in local water supplies had failed when the issue was put to the vote at a community level. The campaign designers were not aware of the cognitive dissonance in the minds of the public. On one hand, scientists claimed that an excess of fluoride was bad for one's health, while on the other hand, the campaigners were proposing an increase in the fluoride level of water as a measure to reduce the incidence of dental caries. The public could not understand why one should add a 'bad' chemical to water which was considered 'pure' and 'natural'. Thus they voted against the initiative. Farr concludes that the health professionals ought to have taken into account people's conceptions of health and illness before planning their campaign.

One of the first steps in designing a campaign should therefore be the understanding of the perceptions and beliefs which the target audience has of the issue being promoted. It is thus important that anybody embarking on a campaign must carry out formative research in order to find out as much as possible about the target audience. In this case study, the campaign was aimed at increasing the number of donor card holders in Malta. For this aim to be reached it was important to understand how the public perceived organ donation and their beliefs about people who give their organs after their death. A similar study carried out in Australia found that the social representation of organ donation and transplantation could be understood best as a representational field organized around two diametrically 'opposed' images—the gift of life and the mechanistic removal and replacement of body parts (Maloney & Walker, 2002). Similar results were found in our study which investigated the representations people had of donors and non-donors and how this changed after a national campaign.

### *Discovering social representations*

Different authors have used different methods to study social representations. Some have used qualitative tools and methods to collect data, for example, ethnographic studies (e.g. Jodelet, 1991), focus groups (e.g. Jovchelovitch & Gervais, 1999) and interviews (e.g. Molinari & Emiliani, 1990). Others have used quantitative data collecting tools like questionnaires (e.g. Augustinos, 1990) and even experiments (Abric, 1984). In their book *Empirical approaches to social representations*, Breakwell and Canter (1993) have argued that virtually every method known to social science has been used at some point in order to study social representations. Moreover, different researchers use different tools to analyse the data. Multidimensional scaling (Uzzell & Blud, 1993), correspondence analysis (Hammond, 1993), cluster analysis (Fife-Shaw, 1993) and discriminant analysis (Zani, 1993) carried out on both quantitative as well as qualitative data are just four examples. Although traditionally such kind of analysis was most often used with data elicited by quantitative methods, it has been shown that these empirical approaches can also be used with methods which yield qualitative data such those obtained through free association techniques (e.g. Di Giacomo, 1980).

In this paper, correspondence analysis was used in a novel way by analysing word associations elicited by photographs. Di Giacomo (1980) observed that, in the study of social

agreed or disagreed. In the last part of the discussion they were also asked to talk about the type of people who, in their opinion, were willing to donate organs after their death and the type of people who were not. This was done through a photolanguage exercise with the aim of eliciting the perceptions which participants had of donors and non-donors.

### *Materials*

In this exercise the stimuli were a set of 60 photographs. These photographs were taken from both local and foreign magazines and were electronically enlarged or cropped to measure 8 cm by 6 cm. The photographs depicted people of all ages, coming from different socio-economic backgrounds and having different lifestyles. For example, an older person working in the fields, an airline pilot, a young person playing the guitar, a woman with a child, and a family around a dinner table. A few of the photographs were of media personalities and public persons.

Participants were asked to choose photographs of people who, they thought, would typically donate their organs and of those who would not. The aims of the exercise were two fold. The first aim was to find out what traits people attributed to organ donors and non-donors. These trait descriptions revealed the stereotypes which were associated with organ donors and non-donors. The second aim was to find out whether these traits changed as a result of a campaign.

For each photograph chosen, the participants were asked to give reasons for their choice. The reasons given described characteristics or traits which, participants perceived donors and non-donors would have. The traits attributed to donors and non-donors were described by adjectives or descriptive phrases. In this exercise, the actual photographs chosen were not important. What were significant were the descriptions given by participants of donors and non-donors.

It is interesting to note that reasons given by most participants for choosing any particular photograph were, in fact, in terms of attribution of traits or dispositions to the person or persons appearing in the photograph. The role of social representations theory in explaining this type of attribution is discussed at length in Chapter 8 of Augoustinos and Walker (1995). These authors write that 'attribution or lay explanations are not only the outcome of individual cognitive processes but are also linked to social and cultural representations.' They also claim that these attributions 'provide social psychologists with insight into a society's prevailing explanations or meaning systems.' (p. 193).

### *Sampling procedure*

There is no agreement among researchers about what type of sampling procedures should be employed when recruiting participants for focus groups. While some researchers claim that the participants must not know each other (e.g. Morgan, 1988) others like Farr, Trutkowski and Holzl (1996) claim that the aim of focus groups is to elicit lay theories and understandings of a group of people who are living and working in the same community. Hence in order for the focus group discussion to reflect a real-life situation, participants must know each other. In this research, both positions were considered. Participants were recruited from different towns and villages from all over the island of Malta to avoid possible biases of particular communities. However participants were also encouraged to invite one or two friends who were willing to accompany them for the discussion.

To recruit participants for the focus groups, three research assistants went to three very popular and well-known meeting places, one in the north, one in the south and one in the

*Analysis of data*

In the following analysis, traits which were mentioned only once were discarded. There were eight such traits. This was done to eliminate one-off descriptions which did not represent shared ideas. This left 215 different utterances classified into 27 traits, which therefore became the levels of the variable *DESCRIPTION*. A contingency table showing the distribution of these utterances amongst the 27 traits and the four donor/non-donor levels is shown in Table 1.

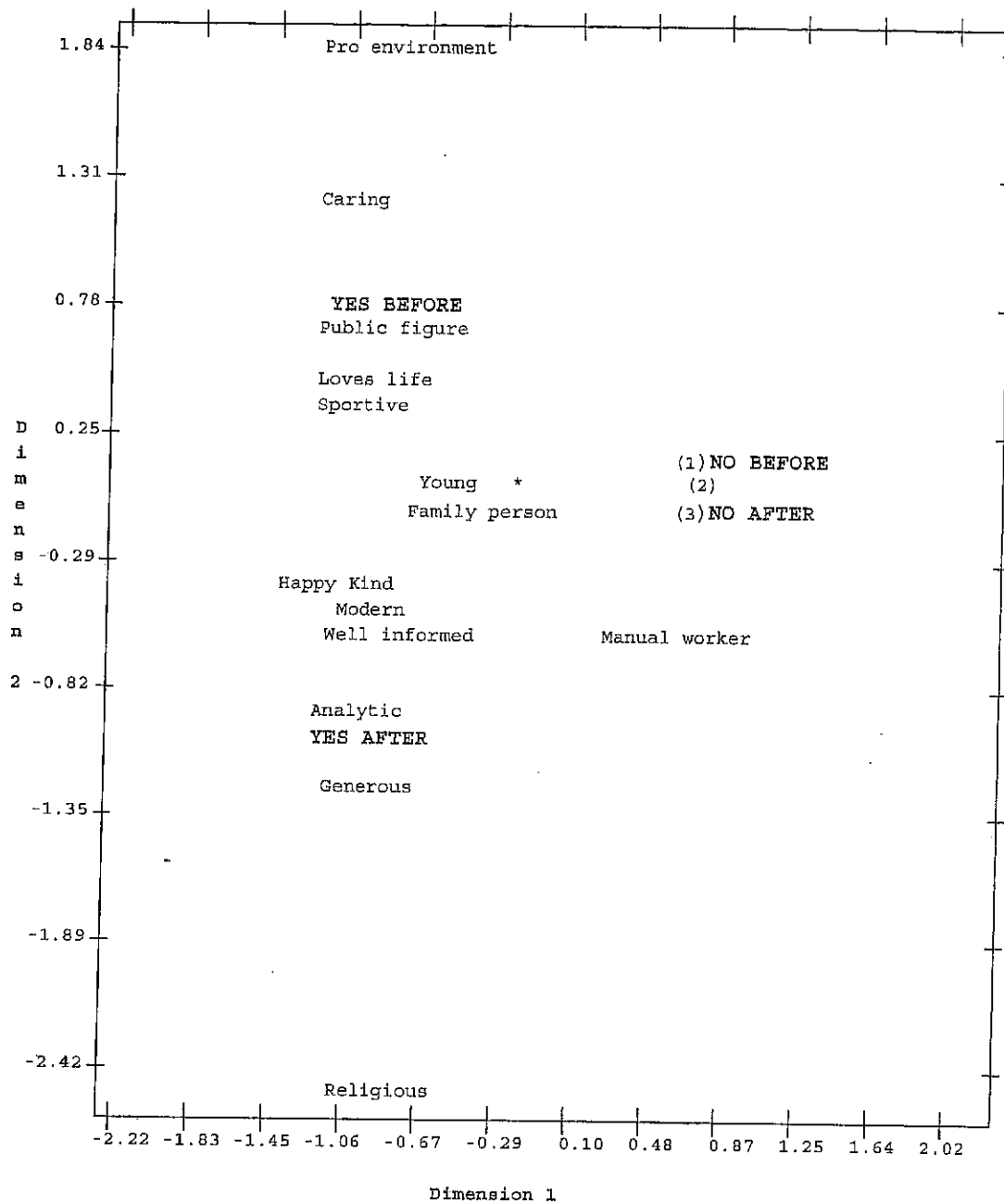
A correspondence analysis was then performed on the data. Correspondence analysis seems to be a very appropriate tool within the context of this investigation of social representations. Hammond (1993) notes that such procedures, 'are all descriptive in essence and are designed as an aid to interpretation and theory construction rather than model testing. The simplicity of the techniques is intended to ensure that the researcher is never far from her own data.' (p. 219).

The aim of correspondence analysis is to help show visually the relationships between the levels in a contingency table. In correspondence analysis, the different levels of the two categorical variables are given scores on one or more dimensions. This is done in such a way that levels that are more alike will get similar scores. Therefore if the scores are then plotted as graphs, levels that are alike appear close to each other whereas levels that are

Table 1. Contingency table for variables *DONOR* by *DESCRIPTION*

<i>DESCRIPTION</i>	<i>DONOR</i>				Total utterances
	Yes before	No before	Yes after	No after	
Public figure	13	0	5	0	18
Well informed	3	0	4	0	7
Young	5	3	4	0	12
Family person	6	0	5	3	14
Old	0	6	0	10	16
Caring	11	0	2	0	13
Sportive	4	0	2	0	6
Loves life	4	0	2	0	6
Does not care about others	0	9	0	7	16
Cold	0	6	0	2	8
Pro environment	3	0	0	0	3
Conservative	0	4	0	5	9
Uninformed	0	5	0	5	10
Kind	3	0	3	0	6
Happy	2	0	2	0	4
Vain	0	2	0	6	8
Religious	0	0	4	0	4
Analytic	2	0	4	0	6
Generous	2	0	5	0	7
Manual worker	0	3	3	5	11
Modern	2	0	2	0	4
Does not understand	0	2	0	4	6
Afraid	0	4	0	3	7
Uneducated	0	0	0	3	3
Unhelpful	0	2	0	2	4
Middle-aged	0	0	0	3	3
Egocentric	0	0	0	4	4
Total	60	46	47	62	215

Row and column scores (canonical normalization)



Summary of multiple points in the plot

Point	Actual label
(1)	Cold
(1)	Afraid
(1)	Does not care about others
(1)	Uninformed
(1)	Unhelpful
(2)	Conservative
(2)	Old
(2)	Does not understand
(2)	Vain
(3)	Middle aged
(3)	Uneducated
(3)	Egocentric

Figure 1. Correspondence analysis—Dimension 1 by Dimension 2.

campaign, donors were generally perceived to be young, caring, practise a sport, love life, have a professional job and are pro-environment. Public figures were very often chosen and perceived to be donors. This can be seen in the top left quadrant of Figure 1. In the focus groups carried out after the campaign, participants selected photos from the same pool. However many of the reasons they gave for choosing particular photos were different. In the post-campaign focus groups, donors were perceived to be ordinary people, manual workers, persons who have a family, who are educated, analytical, happy, kind, modern and well-informed about current affairs, who can therefore make an informed decision, who are generous and who are religious. These can be seen in the bottom left quadrant of Figure 1.

The spread along the third dimension, which opposes descriptions of non-donors before and after the campaign, is shown in Figure 2. This figure plots the row and column scores for Dimension 1 by Dimension 3. In the focus groups carried out before the campaign, non-donors were perceived to be conservative people, people who do not care about others and people who are cold, afraid and uninformed. In the groups carried out after the campaign, non-donors were perceived to be middle-aged or older people, people who have other worries and for whom organ donation would be unimportant, uninformed and uneducated people, and people who are vain and egocentric.

However, Table 1 shows three descriptions which did not fit in so well within this donor/non-donor dichotomy. These were *Young*, *Family Person* and *Manual Worker*. This also appears, to some extent, from the positioning of the three descriptions in the above plots, especially in Figure 1. Some possible reasons why these three descriptions were not exclusive to either donors or non-donors came out in the focus group discussion itself.

In the case of the trait *Young*, some participants judged young people to be more healthy and open-minded and therefore more likely to be donors. However, other participants made a different attribution to photos of young people. They chose images of young people who, through their appearance, gave the impression that they were vain and preoccupied with their image. These types of people were considered to be too egocentric to be donors.

Another interesting pattern came out in the associations with *Family Person*. There were two contrasting points of view. Some participants focused on the parent, usually a mother, and claimed that since parents love their children tremendously, they would be willing to help their children if they needed an organ and would therefore be donors. Other participants, claimed that since all parents love their children tremendously they would find it very hard to donate the organs of their children. So while in the first instance, participants were considering parents giving their *own* bodies, in the other group, they were considering parents giving their *children's* bodies. This therefore could account for the description *Family Person* not fitting in well with the donor or non-donor category.

The third description which did not fit well into either category was *Manual Worker*. The reason for this could be the effect of the campaign. Whereas participants in the pre-campaign focus groups associated *Manual Worker* exclusively with non-donors, the participants in the focus groups carried after the campaign were not so categorical. Some claimed that manual workers, having led a more difficult life than professional workers, would be more able to face the challenge of organ donation.

If these changes can be attributed to the campaign, then it would seem that it has had some measure of success in re-shaping social representations of organ donors and organ donation. Before the campaign, donors were associated with particular categories of people: public figures, young and sportive persons, professionals and people with good jobs.

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