

CAN WE COMPARE THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE ZAZOUS IN THE 1940s AND ADOLESCENTS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS?

Camille De Weer, Nicolas Zdanowicz & Thomas Dubois

Catholic University of Louvain, Psychosomatic Medicine Unit, CHU Mont-Godinne, Yvoir, Belgium

SUMMARY

Background: This article provides an insight into the behaviour of adolescents during the COVID-19 crisis through a comparison with the life of young people living in France under German occupation during the Second World War.

Method: We conducted a literature review of articles in the CAIRN, SCOPUS and PsycINFO databases using the keywords *zazou*, *adolescent* and *COVID-19*.

Results: The *zazou* movement was a manifestation of young people's denial of the war through derision. Initially discredited, it was subsequently violently repressed by collaborationists and supporters of Marshal Pétain, as it was interpreted as an enemy of politics. In particular, it ran contrary to the Vichy regime's desire that young French men should spearhead the national revolution. The reaction among young people was to feel that they were being used by ageing politicians, who they considered were out of touch with reality. With respect to adolescents during the COVID-19 crisis, our review found that the French government has pressurised them to make sacrifices for the rest of the population, and has ignored their greater need for social links with peers. Many adolescents feel that they have been forgotten, in the midst of measures that have been imposed upon them with no explanation. This may have led, as in the 1940s, to a feeling of being instrumentalised and demonised by politicians.

Conclusion: We argue that, in both cases, the dominant oppressive atmosphere has fostered similar behaviours and mental mechanisms. We therefore recommend that, rather than demonising young people, efforts should be made to include them in decision-making processes, in order to improve their understanding of the situation and encourage them to feel included.

Key words: *zazou* – *adolescent* - *young adults* - *COVID-19* - *lockdown*

* * * * *

INTRODUCTION

The current coronavirus crisis has raised questions about the behaviour of adolescents and young adults during lockdown. This segment of the population has been repeatedly pointed at as the reason for the spread of the virus, and their behaviour has been deemed to contravene the public health measures that have been put in place. At the same time, older adults have shown little interest in the consequences of lockdown on this group's mental health, or the reasons why young people have violated public health measures.

This article seeks to develop a better understanding of the state of mind of adolescents during lockdown, by drawing a parallel between them, and the situation of young adults and adolescents in France in the 1940s, under German occupation. We begin by presenting the conditions that young people in France experienced during the Second World War, before looking at the specific case of the *Zazous*. Next, we examine how modern-day adolescents feel about current health measures, and their consequences. Finally, we end by seeing if we can identify any parallels between the two situations and, if so, whether they can be used to better-understand the experience of young people.

METHOD

We conducted a literature review of articles published between 1990 and August 2020 using the CAIRN, SCOPUS and PsycINFO search engines. The

keywords used were *zazou*, *adolescent*, *young adults*, *COVID-19* and *lockdown*.

RESULTS

History: who were the *Zazous*?

Being young under German occupation

Following the Great Depression that took place during the 1930s, young people were often described as lazy and carefree. However, in France, Marshal Pétain was planning to use this youth on the frontline of the National Revolution, the latter being the official ideology of the Vichy regime during the Second World War. Newspapers were used to launch a propaganda effort that aimed to form the younger generation into an acquiescent "Unique Youth" that would blindly obey orders, and be ready to sacrifice themselves for the fatherland.

Restrictions soon began to emerge on both sides of the Vichy demarcation line: restrictions on dress, gatherings, cinema. These restrictions went hand-in-hand with the glorification of manual labour. The latter was both gruelling, and carried out in extremely precarious conditions, with the aim of training virile, young men.

*The *zazou* revolution*

Pétain's Unique Youth idea failed to take root. Many young people felt completely unconcerned by the war, and in no way part of the National Revolution. Like teenagers these days, most adolescents of the time were uninterested in politics; their priority was to enjoy the present and "party".

It was at this point that an unexpected craze emerged for a very unusual kind of foreign music. Jazz had arrived in the heart of France's major cities and, more particularly, Paris. An intoxicating, new way of playing jazz brought with it a new, wild dance – swing. Swing offered young people a way out from their gloomy, cold and hungry environment. From this moment, it would become a leitmotiv and a rallying cry for the Parisian youth.

As time went on, the 'little swingers' became the Zazous. This unusual onomatopoeia was popularised in France in 1939 by Johnny Hesse's song: *je suis swing*. Over time, the word zizou became a synonym for teenagers' protest and molting (*La vie parisienne sous l'Occupation*, Le Boterf H) and reflected young people's desire to deny the war through ridicule (Rioux E). Increasing numbers of young men and women, ranging from students to Paris's golden youth, joined the movement. In addition to their taste for jazz and swing, they defined themselves by their extravagant dress style, which ran completely against the regulatory 'national dress, which was required to be as austere and economical as possible.

Over time, they adopted the habit of meeting in what *La Gerbe* (a French collaborationist newspaper published from 1940 to 1944) called zizou land. The latter encompassed various terraces in expensive areas of Paris, along with small bars and clandestine dance halls, where they practised their favourite activity: party.

Zazous' faith

As enthusiasm for the zizou movement grew among young people, Pétain supporters and collaborationists sought to control the epidemic, fearing that their efforts to create a Unique Youth might be reduced to nothing. The first initiative in this direction was to try to discredit the movement. *Le Cri du Peuple* (a French daily newspaper created by Jules Vallès and Pierre Denis in 1871), claimed that it was the outcome of the dissolution of the family, and the disengagement of parents and politicians. Next, came stigmatisation and condemnation. The Zazous were labelled as a dangerous, 'anti-youth' group that failed to uphold the values advocated by the National Revolution. Newspapers portrayed them as 'enemies of morality', if not 'enemies of politics', and they were presented as the somewhat dim result of bourgeois inbreeding. The final stage was more aggressive, and repression became violent. In 1942, following the failure of Pétain's policy, the regime's position hardened and the police carried out anti-Zazou raids. Those rounded up were sent to work in the countryside, or in Germany. After this point, although the Zazous continued to exist, they moved their activities increasingly underground, to avoid any unwanted consequences.

What can we conclude from the zizou movement?

Experts argue that this phenomenon marked the limits of Vichy ideology. Young people felt that they were being used as sacrificial pawns on a chessboard made up of war and revolution, moved around by

ageing leaders who were cut off from reality. Jazz, swing and garish clothes were used as a symbol to fight against the prevailing austerity, and expressed young people's rejection of the regime – reflecting the true spirit of the resistance.

The effects of lockdown on adolescents

Various studies have looked at what motivates young people to comply with social distancing measures, and the obstacles to their compliance.

Motivations

Ellis et al. (2020) argue that there is evidence that adolescents are concerned about the COVID-19 crisis, and that their main worries relate to their studies and peer relationships. They also share adults' concerns, namely financial problems and the risk of infection for themselves and their loved ones. The latter study points out that adolescents learn more than usual about current events during the crisis.

The negative effects of lockdown

Adolescence is characterised by physiological changes, such as puberty, but also by psychological and social changes. According to Orben et al. (2020), adolescents have an increased sensitivity to social stimuli. This sensitivity is related to a need for interaction with peers, which is greater than that of adults. There is also a need for social approval, and a fear of rejection. This sensitivity is a pathway for the development of both autonomy and empathy. Social distancing measures have considerably limited opportunities for face-to-face contact with peers, leading to feelings of loneliness, a decreased sense of happiness, and an increased thirst for social contact.

It should also be noted that many young people live in working-class neighbourhoods, where the housing stock is overcrowded. In normal circumstances, this drives them outside; public spaces become the main venue for extra-familial social relations. Being deprived of access to these places represents a loss of social ties, which are difficult to replace using social networks. In this context, Orben et al. (2020) point out that having a good relationship with family members, having sufficient personal space, and the active use of social media can reduce the negative effects of social distancing measures.

Noûs (2019) argues that some adolescents do not understand the high stakes, due to the vague, changing regulations that are imposed on them by 'old politicians'. They can end up feeling that lockdown has been forced upon them, and that the main aim is to increase police repression of young people. The latter author also highlights that adolescents have the impression that the government is directing its communication efforts towards the irresponsible behaviour of young people in order to hide its own dismay at its failure to manage the crisis. This leads to a sense of alienation and demonisation, leading to a lack of patience with the government and, in turn, the measures taken by it.

Finally, Marlière (2019) notes that a small proportion of young people have observed that the social movements that seemed to be gradually undermining established powers have been brought to a halt since the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis. This, combined with clumsy, contradictory official decisions, has led to a feeling of manipulation and being muzzled.

DISCUSSION

COVID-19 teens have been compared and made like zazous from the 1940. Are these comparisons reasonable? Can the behaviour of the Zazous help us understand the behaviour of today's teenagers?

Like war, COVID-19 and lockdown threaten the economy, education, and increase food and housing insecurity. Politicians have placed a significant burden on the shoulders of young people by asking them to make major sacrifices to protect the health of the elderly, and other at-risk individuals. We therefore find again, as in the days of the Pétainist regime, a demand from the government that today's adolescents become a model of social responsibility. Moreover, it is important to take into account not just the psychological, but also the physiological need that adolescents have for peer bonding, if they are to develop into mature adults.

We believe that, in addition to the superficial similarities that exist between the Zazous and the COVID-19 young generation, we can identify very similar coping mechanisms. We can see a similar desire to escape from the political system and the responsibility they are forced to bear, in the form of sometimes excessive and thoughtless acts. We would also argue that forcing adolescents to remain confined in their homes, with no social contact, is unreasonable and may have persistent psychological after-effects. In addition, many teenagers are lost in the midst of all these measures that have been forcefully imposed on them without even trying to explain them. This consequently led, as in the 1940s, to a feeling of being instrumentalised and demonized by politicians who are seeking to divert attention from their own mistakes. Given the desperate attempt to force them to take responsibility, and a real witch hunt that seems to seek to discredit them for the slightest mistake, is it really surprising that they fail to respect public health measures?

CONCLUSION

Our analysis of the literature on the behaviour of the Zazous in the 1940s, and adolescents during the

COVID-19 crisis, tends to confirm our hypothesis that there are similarities in both their behaviour and their coping mechanisms – driven by the oppressive atmosphere present in both situations. We argue that, instead of demonising young people, it would be better to include them in decision-making processes, in order to improve their understanding of the situation, and encourage them to feel involved.

Acknowledgements: None.

Conflict of interest: None to declare.

Contribution of individual authors:

Camille De Weer: research and analysis of the literature, interpretation of the data and drafting of the manuscript.

Nicolas Zdanowicz: idea for the article and proofreading.

Thomas Dubois: proofreading.

References

1. Bollon P: *Zazou-zazou-zazouhé. Morale du masque. Merveilleux, zazous, dandys, punks, etc. Le Seuil* 1990; 117-130
2. Efuribe C, Barre-Hemingway M, Vaghefi E & Suleiman AB: *Coping with the COVID-19 Crisis: A Call for Youth Engagement and the Inclusion of Young People in Matters that Affect their Lives. Journal of Adolescent Health* 2020; 67:16-17
3. Ellis WE, Dumas TM & Forbes LM: *Physically Isolated but Socially Connected: Psychological Adjustment and Stress among Adolescents during the Initial COVID-19 Crisis. Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* 2020; 52:177-187
4. Giolitto P: *Séduire et embrigader les jeunes. Histoire de la jeunesse sous Vichy* 1991; 438-495
5. Marlière E: *La cité en confinement. Jeunes en résistance. Les Cahiers Dynamiques* 2019; 77:130-140
6. Nous C: *Covid-19, la guerre et les quartiers populaires. Sociétés contemporaines* 2019; 116:187-201
7. Oosterhoff B, Palmer CA, Wilson J & Shook N: *Adolescents' Motivations to Engage in Social Distancing during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Associations with Mental and Social Health. Journal of Adolescent Health* 2020; 67:179-185
8. Orben A, Tomova L & Blakemore S: *The Effects of Social Deprivation on Adolescent Development and Mental Health. The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health* 2020; 4:634-640
9. Roberts SB: *A Case for Dissidence in Occupied Paris: The Zazous, Youth Dissidence and the Yellow Star Campaign in Occupied Paris (1942). French History* 2010; 24:82-103

Correspondence:

Camille De Weer, MD

Catholic University of Louvain, Psychosomatic Medicine Unit, CHU Mont-Godinne

Rue Dr Gaston Therasse 1, 5530 Yvoir, Belgique

E-mail: camille.deweer@student.uclouvain.be