Diversity faced with cultural inequalities

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Abstract: As the main means of reflecting national identity, the cultural capital of a society encompasses that cumulus of values, symbols behavioral and thinking norms and aspirations as they have been accumulated and assimilated by individuals through the educational processes. Circumscribed to the so-called "cultural code", these features can have both positive and negative effects on intercultural communication and this is precisely what we will pursue through an analysis based on a sociological inquiry by survey, conducted on a sample of Romanian and foreign students belonging to different cultural and linguistic spaces and enrolled in the preparatory year at the *Ştefan cel Mare* University. The paper will therefore emphasize the necessity of the thoroughgoing study of the inequalities that are generated by the subjective perception of reality and education's role in homogenizing them.

Keywords: *culture, intercultural communication, education, inequalities, cultural code, diversity.*

1. Theoretical perspectives concerning *culture*, *intercultural competence* and *intercultural education*

1.1. Subjected to permanent evaluations and redefinitions generated by its implications in the various planes of knowledge (linguistic, geographic, economic, etc.), the concept of *culture* is a dynamic one around which systems of orientation, representation and standardization of the actions that are carried out by the members of a nation are (re)constructed. Culture's open character has been noted multiple times by specialists from different cultural spaces (Welsch, Demorgan, apud Cucoş, 2000: 58; Loenhoff, 1992: 139, *apud* Alexandru, 2011: 26), who prompted the attention on the permanent instability and relocation of the boundaries of the term.

This fact led to the formulation, *until* 1952, of over 165 definitions (Kroeber, Klukhohn, *The Nature of culture*), as well as to the apparition of uncountable theories and models with an ampler or narrower area of applicability. Defined through multiple dimensions (*mental* – with regards to values, norms, representations, mentalities; *material* – represented by artifacts; *functional* – concerning actions, models of interpretation and

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behavior (Loenhoff, 1992, apud Alexandru, 2011: 27), culture has been described in reference to multiple levels which helped us to mark the differences between cultures and is based, according to specialists, on a common background, a nucleus that ensures the cohesion between individuals, "an ensemble of opinions and beliefs which want to be indisputable and which have the force of the obvious and the virtue of the absolute when they are supported by convictions" (Zarate, 1986: 19).

As far as the theoretical models are concerned, one of the most famous theories on culture, supported by empirical studies and put together primarily within organizations, belongs to the Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede and launches four different directions of investigation; these might lead to the differentiation between cultures and a better understanding of them: *the distance from authority*, which evaluates the way in which power is exerted, *individualism/collectivism*, which indicates the degree to which the individual is integrated in a social group; *masculinity/femininity*, which defines the nature of the behavior in a culture; *the tolerance toward ambiguity*, in the sense of the "diminishment of uncertainty" and avoidance of the anxiety that might result from the incapacity to adapt to the requirements of an intercultural dialogue.

Other theoretical models have emphasized the relation between cultural transformations and economic and political factors (*the theory of the long waves or Kondrattieff Wave Theory*, elaborated by Kondrattieff in 1926), have described the process of destructuring and restructuring of values by having gone through multiples phases (*the cultural transformation theory,* formulated by Buhl) or have pursued the projection of a theoretical model with claims of universality with respect to the domains of applicability, cultural space or time[1] ("the cultural theory" or "the theory of the socio-cultural variability", initiated by Mary Douglas and then substantiated in the collective tome *Cultural Theory*, published in 1990 – M. Thompson, R. Ellis, A. Wildavsky (eds.), Boulder. Westview Press). The investigations culminated, starting with 1997, with the amplest study conducted on a sample of 85% of the world's population, dedicated to the cultural dimensions and their implications in the various domains of social life, project known under the name *World Values Surveys* (WVS), conducted by a team under the leadership of Roland Inglehart, (1997) and his collaborators (Inglehart, Norris, 2004; Inglehart, Welzel, 2005; Welzel Inglehart, 2010, *apud*)[2].

The theorization of culture has generated the emergence of different typologies, depending on the targeted perspective. In this way, when it comes to the temporal criterion, we can talk about ancient culture, modern culture etc.; when the geographical criterion is concerned, about Greek culture and Latin culture etc.; when it comes to the applicability domain criterion, we can talk about physical culture, informational culture, organizational culture, political and electronical culture, entrepreneurial culture and many others); insofar as the relation between cultures is concerned, a distinction was made between the cultures that have been strongly dependent on context and those weakly, loosely dependent on context, the mono-chronological and the poly-chronological ones. The emergence of new domains of investigation has implicitly generated the emergence of a certain specialty terminology in which we can find terms as: *trans-culture*, *multiculturalism, inter-culturalism* and others.

[1] See Corina Benea's, *Probleme de interpretare a teoriei culturale,* http://www.history-cluj.ro/SU/anuare/2009/Continut/art05Benea.pdf

[2] For more details, see https://alingavreliuc.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/psihologie-interculturala-gavreliuc-2011.pdf, pp. 160-165.

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1.2. We find the same interpretative aperture in the case of the concept of *intercultural competence*, with the multitude of the perspectives subjected to evaluation emphasizing the fact that we are faced with a complex construct that can be "circumscribed theoretically as *abilities* (Wiseman and Koesler, 1993, apud Cozma, Butnaru, Popa, 2006: 85), as ensemble of *features*, grouped in at least 5 dimensions, as well as *process of development* (Fantini, 2000)" (apud Cozma, Butnaru, Popa, 2006: 85).

The study of the intercultural competence has emphasized the fact that this, too, is a dynamic term that generates multiple typologies (Spitzberg and Cupach – 1994, Martyn Barett, Barteltsmann Stiftsung), theoretical models (Deardorff, 2006, 2009) and concepts: *intercultural effectiveness, intercultural sensitivity* and *intercultural success*.[3] With respect to the terminology, the concept is foreshadowed, without being named explicitly, in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment and in the European Language Portfolio (The European Council, 2000), which refers to two types of skills that must be formed through the process of learning a foreign language: *general skills and communication skills,* skills that can be achieved by passing from a general knowledge (*savoirs*), to a particular one (*savoir-être, savoirs'engager*) in which the differences between the cultures can be identified as a consequence of the clash between certain central symbols that are transmitted, knowingly or unknowingly, by the members of a group. Subsequently, these ought to be integrated in the already existing background of knowledge and this baggage will grant the person the possibility to deal with the communication situation inter-culturally (*savoir-faire*) (Byram, 1997: 54). The same author shed light on a possible confusion that could perpetuate itself in relation to other concepts with a formal likeness, but with a different meaning: *intercultural competence*, which might send to the capacity to interact with persons that belong to other cultural and linguistic spaces and *intercultural communicative competence*, which refers to the capacity to speak in a different language.

1.3. A subject of debate in the European Council and the International Committee of UNESCO for the Education of the 21st Century, the *intercultural education* is based on multiple principles and objectives, synthesized by C. Rus (2002: 9), which underline three distinct directions: the *knowledge* of the cultural uniqueness from a linguistic space, *the development* of skills in relation to the way of living in an intercultural society and *the formation* of skills. To these, we could add, according to P. Batelaan, (2003: 7), other dimensions like: *diversity*, in which the emphasis is put on presenting reality as a cumulus of different elements (groups, various standpoints on the same reality) and *equity*, understood as the acceptation and legitimization of the opinions that are expressed by others. The specialists in the field warn about a possible confusion of the term *intercultural education* with the term *multi-ethnical (multicultural) education*, concept used in the Anglo-Saxon space after 1960 and which designates the promotion of cultural uniqueness and the introduction of certain demarches aimed at the conservation of the individual values of those cultural areas (Stan, 2010: 47), unlike the concept of *intercultural education*, which puts the emphasis on overcoming the borders between the various cultural areas and the formation of a flexible way of thinking.

As far as the intercultural education in schools is concerned, myriad strategies were formed throughout the years, all of them aiming at making indicative "maps" and implicitly at leveling the inequalities that are generated by indifference to the cultural codes. Of all these, C. Stan (2010: 52), mentions the introduction in the educational-instructive activity of a certain information about the culture and the history of other communities, with an emphasis on common elements; the comparative presentation of the cultural

[3] https://www.education.uw.edu/cirge/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Darla-INTERCULTURAL-COMPETENCE-MODELS-deardorff-09.pdf.

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elements and the creation of radiographies that can facilitate the identification of the common elements, as well as of the different ones; the exemplification of personalities that belong to national or international culture; the intermediation of certain meetings with persons that belong to different religions and ethnicities. To these, we might add actions that can support the intercultural conduit like, for instance: the avoidance of the stereotypes in favor of the promotion of cultural diversity, the introduction of an intercultural curriculum, the use of didactical methods (role-playing games, workshops of intercultural communication, case studies, etc.), as well as the introduction of a few directions that might facilitate, according to L. Antonesei (2002: 22), the access to an understanding of the cultural uniqueness of other communities.

2. Experimental research concerning the evaluation of the intercultural competence of the Romanian and foreign students

The investigation has been conducted through a survey and its elaboration had, as starting point, the theoretical model proposed by Ruben (1976) and the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Communication Effectiveness – BASIC, elaborated by Koester and Olebe (Koester, Lusting, 1993). The research aimed at identifying the psycho-behavioral features that must be possessed by the actors of the intercultural dialogue and their capacity to negotiate cultural meanings, at identifying certain progressive phases of the development of the intercultural competence, as well as at the elaboration of good strategies meant to improve it. The survey is comprised of nine questions, of which two are open and two closed, organized on three directions borrowed from the BASIC model, to which we added supplementary meanings that we will discuss in those that follow: the posture of interaction, the management of the interaction and the relational behavior.

The posture of interaction refers to, according to the aforementioned authors, the ability of formulating answers with a high degree of generality in a non-evaluative manner that does not *qualify*, but describe. In addition to this meaning, we pursued the capacity for knowledge and understanding of the person that participates in the intercultural dialogue. *The management of the interaction* refers to, in the opinion of the authors, to the abilities that certain persons acquire – abilities that help them to maintain and lead a dialogue. *The relational behavior* has a bidirectional aim, in line with BASIC: *the direction that is concerned with the accomplishment of an action*, in our case it targets the capacity to find solutions that can lead, eventually, to the person overcoming the various cultural inequalities and the modalities of intervening where intervention is needed via education; the second direction refers to the *relational behavior*, i.e. to those actions that consolidate and harmonize the communication between the participants in the dialogue and implicitly, between the members of the group. As was as we are concerned, we introduced a question into the second category, one that has followed the identification of those psycho-behavioral features that are necessary for the formation and the development of the intercultural competence.

The research was conducted on a sample of 60 Romanian students enrolled as freshmen at the Faculty of Letters and Communication Studies (double major degree) within the "Ştefan cel Mare" University from Suceava and 10 foreign students, enrolled in the preparatory year at the same faculty.

A. With respect to the *posture of interaction*, this has encompassed the following questions:

a. *How frequently did you have the occasion to interact with persons from different cultural and linguistic spaces?*

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The statistical processing has shown that 60% of the Romanian students had had the occasion to interact with persons from different cultural and linguistic spaces, whereas 100% of the foreign students had previously had contact with persons belonging to different cultures.

b. *Do you think that we could talk about the existence of superior cultures and inferior cultures? Justify your answer.*

As far as this question is concerned, the opinions of the Romanian students are comparable to those of their foreign colleagues. Whereas 40% of the Romanian students consider that there is a firm delimitation between superior and inferior cultures, 65% of the interviewed foreign students opine that the qualifying terms that are present in the question are inadequate and that they should be more nuanced.

c. *Do you think that, in order to understand the cultural uniqueness of a people, it is necessary to know the elements of the cultural code from that country?*

The answers of the Romanian students have underlined that approximately 90% of the students responded affirmatively, whilst only 10% gave a negative answer. All of the foreign students agreed that the elements of the said code are essential to the understanding of the cultural uniqueness of the country.

d. *Can you name a few cultural particularities of the linguistic space that you are representing (beliefs, customs, forms of expressing respect, the method of fulfilling a task, etc.)?*

The most known cultural particularities that characterize that cultural and linguistic space that they represent are, in the opinion of the Romanian students: the use of the personal pronouns that are used for expressing politeness, the customs and the traditions that accompany the funerals and the religious holidays and the beliefs and the superstitions. Of all the cultural particularities brought forth by the foreign students, we best reminisce: the special forms of expressing respect, which are reflected in the various kinetic uses, the proxemics (bringing the hosts gifts when visiting them, looking the interlocutor in the eye during the dialogue), the various beliefs and superstitions (looking at one's reflection in a mirror upon arriving home to take an object that one has forgotten is a bad omen, as is shattering a mirror or a light bulb; in order to get rid of the effects of the evil eye, people throw water three times over their right shoulder or knock on wood and others).

B. With respect to the management of the interaction two open questions were formulated:

Do you think that culture has a massive influence on communication?

The answers of the Romanian students have been quite manifold: 82% of the respondents think that it is the individual that has a massive influence, 8% think that people are not influenced by culture and the remaining 10% have different opinions. 84% of the foreign students appreciate culture's influence in communication.

Can you mention whether or not your own culture had an influence on your behavior and way of communicating?

Culture's influence on their own behavior has been recognized by all the respondents, both Romanian and foreign.

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C. Relational role

Which of the following personality traits do you consider to be decisive in establishing efficient and adequate behaviors of communication in a cultural context?

a) Respect
b) Empathy
c) Flexibility
d) Patience
e) Curiosity
f) A sense of humor
g) Tolerance
h) Other features

The psycho-behavioral features that the participants at the intercultural dialogue must possess are, from the standpoint of the Romanian students, the following (in this order): respect, empathy, flexibility, patience, curiosity, tolerance and a sense of humor. The most important personality traits that have a decisive role in establishing efficient and adequate behaviors of communication in an intercultural context are, for the foreign students: respect, flexibility, patience, curiosity and tolerance.

Do you think that in order to understand the cultural uniqueness of a people it is necessary to know the elements of the cultural code from that country?

The importance of those elements has been recognized by both the Romanian and the foreign students.

Which of the following ways can be seen as solutions for overcoming cultural inequalities?

a) By gaining more knowledge about that culture;

b) By reducing, at the mental level, of the shock that results from the novel elements that pertain to a different culture;

c) By other means (name them)……..

The answers of the Romanian students were diverse and most of them had an emphasis on the importance of knowing and understanding the particularities of other cultures by means of various disciplines (Culture and civilization), texts studied in school and extracurricular activities. This question has generated answers that put the foreign students on a different position, in the sense that all the respondents consider that education has a decisive role, but cannot lead to the uniformity of those inequalities.

3. Conclusions

The analysis of the data provided by the foreign and the Romanian students that were part of the sample has emphasized the fact that the persons in question are profoundly influenced by the cultural factors that act in the interior of a society and that they have a modulating effect and are translated through the existence of a particular code, exteriorized differently depending on the appurtenance to culture. Whether they are personality or behavioral features, these have a major importance in the intercultural communication, and in order for this to be successful, a permanent training is required. Education's role is a fundamental one, because it will manage to – through different ways of intervention - prepare young adults that will adapt to intercultural communication a lot easier and will even be capable of great performance.

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