The dynamic of stereotypes and prejudices in the multicultural environment

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Abstract

We are dealing with different entities, they form patterns of behaviour and pupils may belong to different socio-cultural segments through the origin, language, religion, values, mentalities and attitudes towards the world. In our community the Romanians the majority and they are living with Hungarian, Germans, Gypsies, the Hungarians being the most representative ethno-cultural group in Tîrgu Mures (from Transylvania, Romania). The purpose of our research is to capture in what way this multicultural school environment influences the adolescents in perceiving people from another culture, taking in consideration the ethnic criteria. In order to reveal the perception between Romanian and Hungarian teenagers, we have applied the "Social Distance" Test, inspired from the research of Bogardus. The “Social distance” reveals the behavioural intentions, the degree of acceptance of people from two different ethno-cultural groups.

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Keywords: Multicultural school; social and personal identities; the belonging to a cultural group, social distance;

1. Multicultural school environment

It is a truism the fact that the humanistic education provided by the Romanian schools is nowadays multi/intercultural, driven by learning several foreign languages, European and universal values within mixed schools and bilingual classes. Getting rid of the immobility caused by the multiplicity of cultural belonging is the key for education and multicultural cross-type (Abdalah - Pretceille, 1996).

When Camilleri (1988) is analyzing the relationship between the students’ cultures, he highlights that “the general tendency among students as well as teachers is to consider themselves as belonging to unequal civilizations, which can be distributed along a value scale, where the culture of the dominant group is naturally perceived as the first”. A culture can only develop only by reference to another culture.

One of the key consequences of the school as an organization is the presence of a diversity of cultures and subcultures with different degrees of convergence. This can however be also a source of progress and development of the school. Nevertheless, it is important to note that in different areas of Transylvania (Romania), Romanians to

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Hungarians ratio reverses, the latter representing the majority (counties such as Harghita and Covasna), or being statistically as numerous as the Romanians (Mures county).

Consequently we have to ask ourselves: What represents the school for a teenager?

Family, school, community, group of friends are factors that have a strong influence on the adolescent personality development. The reference group is thus becoming very important because it provides the basis and the source for the construction of the teenager’s identity. In addition to the self-perception, the recognition of “others” is also influenced by the stereotypes and prejudices cultivated into the group he is affiliated to. In order to have these groups actually functioning, it is required to have similarity in what concerns age, ethnicity or race, socioeconomic level.

2. The social identities theory

The dynamic of intergroup relations determines changes in the construction of someone’s identity and in the way people live in a multicultural community, and how they are “opening” and “closing” to each other from the perspective of the socio- and ethno-cultural affiliation. To meet the numerous questions that arise with regards to intra- and inter-group processes, several social identity theories have been issued, as presented in the paragraphs below.

When individuals interact, they cannot ignore the group membership (in-group), namely what is specific, distinctive and unique to their ethno-cultural group, but also features that are similar with the “other” group (out-group). To explain these results, Tajfel (1972) is advancing theoretical assumptions based on social comparison theory of Festinger (1954), by proposing an extension of the concepts that articulate identity and social comparison. An individual “will try to maintain membership in a group and seek to join other groups if they can strengthen the positive aspects his social identity” (Tajfel, H. cf. S. Moscovici, 1972, p. 293 - 295).

Based on these theorems, Tajfel and Turner deduced the following theoretical principles:

1. Individuals tend to reach (or maintain) a positive social identity, this being the psychological structure that links the individual to the group and makes the individual to accept processes and behaviours specific to the group.

2. Positive social identity is largely based on the favourable comparisons made between the affiliation group and other relevant groups. The group will be positively perceived if it is seen as distinct from other categories.

3. When the social identity becomes unsatisfactory for the individual, he tends either to leave the group and join a positive one or to highlight the current group's positive features. This phenomenon is rarely present and very difficult for the individual, because he is “the prisoner of his own identity”, the personal identity characteristics being constructed on the basis of social identity and socio-cultural affiliation. For this reason, leaving the group would be equal to giving up some features, which nevertheless used to give uniqueness to his personality.

The social identity approach is linked through a continuum of personal approach. At one pole, individuals are considered interchangeable members of a group, while at the other they are treated as having unique personalities and specific nature. Thus, differentiation between groups is opposing the differentiation between private individuals. An important role for inter-cultural relations is therefore taken by stereotypes, prejudices and their influence on the attitudes of “openness - closeness” that people use in these relations. Consequently, it is important to study the distance that one cultural group keeps from another, as negative thinking might be identified, such as discrimination and categorization of the “other”.

3. The “Social Distance” Test, a tool for measuring social attitudes

Stereotypes, categorizations, prejudices and discrimination are factors that influence perceptions and inter-cultural relations. All these lead to a close or distant relationship between different cultural groups (Romanian and Hungarian in our research).
Since 1925, EE Bogardus (cf. I. Radu, P. Ilut, Matthew L., 1994) proposed tests to study the ethnic and cultural prejudices. The author expected a measurement of “rejection” presented by successive opinions which would position the “other” to an increasing distance. These tests tried to measure the distance that a group needs to keep from another, the social distance revealing behavioural intentions, the degree of acceptance of people of other ethnicities. As a stimulus-person, it was selected a member of an ethno-cultural group, and then the intensity of his commitment in one direction or another was verified through a question.

The test was adapted for the acceptance or the rejection of Hungarian teenagers by the Romanians and vice versa, and was applied to Hungarians in their native language. Subjects had to answer to the questions on a scale from 1 to 7 where 4 is a neutral position, 1 meaning “Definitely NO” and 7 a “Radical YES”. The intensity of NO decreases on the 2nd and 3rd position and from 5 onwards the intensity of YES increases. The questionnaires are anonymous and contained the following questions:

1. Would you accept a Hungarian/ Romanian to be a presumptive marriage partner of your brother / sister or other member of your family?
2. Would you like to have a Hungarian/Romanian personal friend?
3. Would you invite home a Hungarian/ Romanian?
4. Would you present him/ her to your parents?
5. Would you mind a Hungarian/ Romanian to live in the same building with you?
6. Would you accept to go to a party where there are also Hungarians/ Romanians?
7. Do you have Hungarians/ Romanians in your group of friends?
8. Would you accept to be a member of a cultural group Hungarians/ Romanians are also part of?
9. Do you want to communicate with Hungarians/ Romanians in order know them better?
10. Would you like to be a classmate of a Hungarian/ Romanian?
11. Would you like to have a desk colleague Hungarian/ Romanian?
12. Would you like to attend a school where there are Hungarians/ Romanians?
13. Do you mind to live in a city where there are also Hungarians?
14. Would you mind to live in a city where Hungarians are the majority?
15. Would you like to live in a city where Romanians are the majority?
16. Would you like to live in a city where there are only Hungarians/ Romanians?

The independent variables of the test are: Gender (male/female); The studies of the parents; Your family has relatives in Hungary?; Do you have in your block or street the Hungarian neighbours?; Are there any Romanians/Hungarians in your family?

By using this method we can obtain a comparison of how members of different cultural groups (Romanian and Hungarian) accept or open to the “other”, but also how they reject or “close”. This is where, according to Wilder in agreement with Tajfel’s research, the lack of individualisation of “the other group”, its “uniformisation” justifies the discriminatory behaviour displayed by the group members as well as the rejection of the out-group diversity, in order to maintain the illusion that they could easily predict their actions. This test transposes the pupil in the situation of a meeting between identities where, function of the social proximity, the self-awareness and the sense of identity are likely to be modified.

3.1. The sample of test subjects

The “Social distance” test had been applied on 200 subjects from Tirgu Mures, subjects selected on the following criteria: high school pupils - ages 15-16,100 subjects mainly from Romanian College of “Al. Papiu Ilarian”,100 Hungarian subjects from the exclusively Hungarian College of “Bolyai Farkas”.

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3.2. Significant results of “Social Distance” Test

The intercultural meetings value and devalue, strengthen and weaken not only the real exchange between individuals, but changes also the relationship between the symbols, imaginary, myths and fantasies of the individual or the group (Cucos, C., 2000, p. 148). Let’s see to what extent the adolescents underline or on the contrary diminish the differences, activating more or less the filters of their belonging cultures. As the chart below depicts, there are some significant differences between Romanian and Hungarian pupils responses to some specific items in the test.

It seems that when it comes to the Hungarians to accept a Romanian as a member of the family and vice versa, both groups of subjects exhibit some opening, but maintaining a neutral attitude. In this case we discuss about a personal distance and about passing in someone's private space. When talking about Romanians and Hungarians living in the same building, apparently they do not mind, Romanians being however more receptive than Hungarians. Here proximity is referring to physical space, each having the freedom to choose to relate or not, or how much to do it. As shown in the graphs below, 24% of Hungarian and 28% of Romanian pupils are very sure that they would easily accept a member of the “other” group in their family. It is culturally important to note that more than half of Hungarians, 62% respectively and 69% of Romanians are open to this idea. Also in the personal interaction area, we note that Hungarians are slightly more open to the idea of welcoming a Romanian in their group. This is explained in the light of the fact that Romanians are the majority in Tg. Mures although the ration Romanians to Hungarians is not very large.

![Figure 1. The answers of Hungarians and Romanians at the “Social Distance” Test](image)

Also 24% of Romanians and 33% of Hungarians in the tenth grade state categorically that they have in their group of friends Hungarians or Romanians; despite the fact that Hungarian pupils are studying in a predominantly Hungarian school, this has not resulted in “a hermetic field of social relations”, but on the contrary, they related with people of other nationalities outside the school environment.
The results from the figures above explain the desire of adolescents to communicate to better know each other, the average position being about 5 on the response scale. In this regard, 55% of Hungarians are open to communication FIRMLY saying a YES while only 35% of the Romanian state this categorically.

4. Conclusions

A positive thing for the inter-cultural education of young people in the local communities is that they would not like to live in a city where there are only Romanians or Hungarians, indicating that the boundaries between the two cultures are permeable; there are even areas where the two cultures overlap, as 70% of the Hungarian students and 54% of the Romanian students do not mind living in a city where both groups are present.

The most important thing we can conclude from the study is that the social environment strongly influences the dominance of personal identity to the detriment of the social one and vice versa. In a community, a multicultural society, the social identity is the engine of interpersonal and intergroup relations, the ethno-cultural affiliation being omnipresent. In this respect, it is important to note that a distinction between “self” and “other” coexists with the differentiation between „us” and „them” (Lorenzi – Cioldi, F., Doise, W., 1990).

References