

## **EXPLORING GEOGRAPHIES OF EXCLUSION: AN INQUIRY UPON LIMITS AND GOALS OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION WITHIN COMMUNICATION SCIENCES PROGRAMS**

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**Abstract:** *Contemporary turn of informational revolutions raised vivid debates about genuine competencies and goals associated to intercultural communication. Geographies of exclusion became connected with ascent of new imagined and virtual communities, reshaping the democratic accountability and sustainability of Eastern and Central Europe. In this context, the study is pursuing two key hypotheses. First claims that intercultural training, carried through interactive didactic activities, represents a vector for increasing democratic behaviour, while the second one sustains that cross-cultural oriented educational curricula influence the establishment of civic responsibility. The research explores the intercultural competencies acquired by undergraduate students enrolled in communication sciences programs, following topics as: representations and discourses of majority and minority cultures, landmarks of marginality and stigma and not lastly, effects triggered by intercultural training upon active citizenship.*

**Keywords:** *intercultural education, geographies of exclusion, intercultural competencies, narratives of identity, active citizenship.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The global scene has changed since 1980, when UNESCO released its statement upon role of communication in shaping global politics and culture. Entitled "Many voices, one world", the UNESCO proclamation tackled the increasing concerns raised by echoes of informational revolutions in subjects as cultural alienation, isolation of marginal groups and political tendencies towards homogenization and silent integration of alternative identities (MacBride *et al.*, 1980: 160-162).

The '80 inaugurated however a nexus of phenomena including multiplication of modernity games (Sachsenmaier *et al.*, 2002: 197), proliferation of classical social cleavages, *detritorialization* of political orders, rise of non-state actors and ascent of new identity patterns, overpassing the traditional landmarks of nation or ethnicity. All these trends can be related with the profound changes triggered by popularization of mass communication and rise of network societies (Castells, 2011:1968). A few decades later, the genesis of virtual diasporic communities, accompanied by segregation of urban cultures from

peripheral and marginal space, determined new fragmentation lines, the behavioural and cultural clauses of democracy being putted under scrutiny. In this context, the study aims to sketch an exploratory map of the interdependencies arisen amid intercultural competencies and civic accountability of youth, by measuring the impact of intercultural education upon topics as virtual activism, attitudes towards minority groups and discourses of marginality and stigma. By invoking the Romanian casuistry, the research intends to demonstrate the resilience of some pre-modern stereotypes in defining and circulating identity narratives and in establishing geographies of exclusion (Sibley, 1995: 109).

### **2. INTERCULTURALISM AND MULTICULTURALISM. RESETTING THE FRAME**

**2.1 Reconciliation in intercultural and multicultural dialogue.** Even if the terms of intercultural education and intercultural competencies are widely used in communication sciences or media studies, perhaps they aren't yet fully understood (Fantini, 2000:26). Even so, the

interculturalists do agree upon what we may call as the dual nature of the intercultural communication, a notion which requires the simultaneous presence into different cultural realms. In order to develop competence in another culture it is imperative to assume a powerful reflection upon your own cultural frame. By overpassing the language barrier, the native world of a different community, individual or group may seem accessible, but these intuitive translations may conceal yet strong stereotypes. Initially the intercultural training was designed to respond to the exigencies of those who choose to work in international and intercultural contexts (Fantini, 2000:25).

Nevertheless it was the case of a well-educated minority, experiencing the openness of globalization and transnationalization. However, the picture evolved in recent times, when digitalization and glocalization remodelled the internal geographies and imageries of national and traditional cultures.

The borders divide from now on not only national identities, but increasingly different social and cultural groups. In many liberal societies or more recently consolidated democracies, the rural communities and the peripheral groups, excluded often from the digital turn of social life, started to develop isolated cultural patterns. The reverberations of these new inter-societal cleavages may be recognized in contradictory trends such as: ascent of populism, decline of cultural consensus, radicalization of youth or unprecedented civic effervescence, ended often in democratic erosion (Negri, 2020:1).

Step by step, the intercultural dialogue began to matter. It was a long way from the historically roots of intercultural doctrine, targeting the cross-cultural communication problems which hampered collaboration amid individuals living in overseas communities and immigrant groups (Sinicrope *et al.*, 2007:2), to nowadays wide spectrum intercultural challenges. Purposes of intercultural training expanded, this growing interest in identifying solutions for nation-states cultural dilemmas being confirmed by proliferation of related labels.

No matter if we speak about cross-cultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, *ethnorelativity*, *pluralism* (Sinicrope *et al.*, 2007:2) or contemporary puzzle word, globalism, this emergent vocabulary confirms the presence of an interesting unification movement. The dissolution of the dividing line between multiculturalism and interculturalism can be explained by appealing the unforeseen permeability and porosity of the borders, multiplied in inlands and slowly dissolving in

regional and transnational settings. Previously clash amid multicultural arguments and the intercultural approaches was based on integration versus assimilation dispute. Yet, the already complicated topic of identity narratives, based on ethno-historical traditional imageries or on the contrary, stemmed from more diverse and polyvalent identity equations (Meer *et al.*, 2016:8), it is revisited currently in the light of new difficult interrogations.

The logic of the nation-based political order was questioned by ascent of deterritorialization and diasporization, influential political leaders announcing the failure of classical projects of multiculturalism. In only one decade, Merkel, Sarkozy and Cameron, to name only a few, heralded the end of multiculturalism (Farrar *et al.*, 1999:9). The disenchantment of the multicultural credo was however determined by a very narrow understanding of its purposes. The multicultural design assumed by many European nations claimed to maintain the hegemony of a coherent master narrative (Meer *et al.*, 2016:8). Digitalization, along with migration and awakening of various dormant group identities made that claim difficult to satisfy. European multicultural project wasn't contradicted only by disruptive ethnic and religious minorities, almost impossible to integrate, but rather was denounced by later developments of globalization phenomenon. Continuous atomisation of social life and the growing distances amid generational cultures fostered contemporary rejection of initial model of multiculturalism.

New network societies expel the hypothesis of a dominant identity narrative, designed to absorb and harmonize the subjacent cultural nuances. In this latter days, even national grounds are subject of multiple and multimodal cultural orders. Hereby, the claims of multiculturalism and interculturalism slowly overlap (Meer *et al.*, 2016:8). First term was seen as integrative and unifying, while the second one was perceived as more geared on interactions of varied identities, excluding the metaphor of the melting pot. Leaving behind the complicated theoretical and ideological scaffolding surrounding multiculturalism versus interculturalism debate, one conclusion tend to emerge. The distances amid intercultural and multicultural perspectives are blurred, as W. Kymlicka announced in the advent of tech and digital activism (Kymlicka 2012:7).

In this manner intercultural and multicultural competencies present themselves more interrelated and interconnected than ever, mostly in field of education and formation. Cross-cultural dilemmas are surrounding everyday experiences, starting

with assigning the definition of minority and stigma and ending with electoral behaviour.

More important, the development and use of these competencies will decide whether or not young citizens will succeed in adapting their mind-sets and world views into different cultural codes, securing the liberal democracy equation within polyphonic cultural geographies.

**2.2 Defining the terms and identifying the relevant research hypotheses.** A major challenge in assessing a synthetic cultural competencies model refers to the identification of a unified conceptual model. Such endeavour present itself as temerarious, due to multiple reasons: diversity of approaches and sources, presence of multiple research fields with different methodological traditions and not lastly fluidity of concepts.. Still, researchers tend to agree in characterizing cultural competences by invoking three major milestones (Fantini, 2000:27): 1. the ability to develop and maintain relationship, 2. the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately and 3. the ability to attain cooperation and compliance. This triadic structure proves that:

not only do these domains form part of “intercultural” relations, they are equally germane to “interpersonal” relations. The intercultural level, however, is further complicated when people interact across cultures because their commonalities diminish while differences increase dramatically.

Fantini’s perspective signalize however the complexity of the variables that govern human interactions, as regards different and foreign culture, global medium or even more and more segregated local pictures. We may find difficult to maintain relationship, or to cooperate and communicate effectively and appropriately not only with foreign individuals or minority groups, but also with different generational layers or emerging youth cultures.

Giving the fact that intercultural competence may be concurrently defined as “the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways” (Bennet *et. al.*, 2003: 422), as well as assuming landmarks such as “curiosity and openness”, “knowledge of one’s self and others”, “skills of interpreting, relating, discovery and interactions” or critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997: 88), one key query tend to detach. In which manner should be applied the cultural competences frameworks in analysis of contemporary societies, trapped under siege of digitalization and

detritorialization? And going one step further, to which critical research questions should this framework respond? No matter whether we appeal Ruben’s *Behavioural Approach*, grounded on seven dimensions of intercultural competences, including display of respect and empathy (Ruben, 1976:335), Byram’s *Multidimensional Model of Intercultural Competences*, revolving around key assumption of interpreting and relating with others experiences (Byram, 1997:90) or classical Developmental Model used by Bennet since early ’80 (Bennet *et. al.*, 2003: 422), all the theories mentioned above disclosed interesting correlation with subject of civic accountability.

The pursuit of abilities as tolerance, anxiety and uncertainty management (Gudykunst, 1998:228) and cross cultural adaption may have a true impact on active citizenship behaviour. The last term can be defined by addressing related concepts like community and voluntary action, promotion of equality and acceptance for different cultural identities or advocacy in favour of alternative identities (Hoskins *et al.*, 2008:386). Yet the studies carried in early 2000 upon active citizenship across Eastern Europe, showed a significant delay in developing civic awareness and civic literacy (Hoskins *et al.*, 2008:390. The evaluation of three indicators of civic engagement such as voting behaviour, membership in public organization and protest mobilization testified the resilience of a cultural gap. Countries as Romania presented high rates of voting, while the membership and the protest mobilization rates remain quite low (Hoskins *et al.*, 2008:391).

In this context, two essential research hypotheses came into prominence:

**H.1:** Intercultural training, carried through applied didactic activities, could represent a vector for increasing democratic behaviour, tolerance and civic engagement, raising awareness upon different translations and meanings of discrimination.

**H.2:** Evolutions occurred in formal education curricula and growing influence of cross-cultural medium may enable the establishment of cultural abilities promoting active citizenship.

Final section investigates the validity of previous research questions using the focus group matrix, in order to identify functional correlations appeared amid intercultural abilities acquisition and active citizenship behaviour in case of Romanian students, enrolled in communication sciences study programs. The terms intercultural education and intercultural abilities are preferred

due to their visibility and are not used in opposition with the multicultural perspectives. Rather, the research militates for a unifying and comprehensive approach.

### 3. GEOGRAPHIES OF EXCLUSION. LIMITS AND GOALS OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN CASE OF ROMANIAN STUDENTS WITHIN COMMUNICATION SCIENCES PROGRAMS

#### 3.1. Context and relevance of research.

Romanian youth mobilization should represent an interesting inquiry topic, given the fact that vernacular democracy hosted recently the clash a two civilizational models. Last decade disclosed the confrontation of two divergent youth trends: one progressionist youth wave, motivated and empowered by environmentalist awareness (Pavlínek & Pickles, 2002:190) and a radical counterreaction, grounded on claims as socio-economic disadvantage, marginalisation and alienation (Gavrielides, 2018:31). However, the configuration of youth cultures in Romania was often depicted in simplifying terms, most risks of radicalization being explained as consequences of poverty, dysfunctional familial models and lack of social visibility. Once they felt misunderstood by society and deprived of rights, young Romanians become more exposed to domestic radicalization phenomena (Gavrielides, 2018: 31).

Yet, it is important to mention that there is a significant distinction between cognitive and behavioural radicalization: first stage refers to expression and promotion of radical ideas, while the second one implies the presence of radical actions (Gavrielides, 2018:31). At this very moment, Romanian perspective upon youth radicalization remains dominated by a cognitive pattern, but it doesn't expel the hypothesis of a behavioural mutation. All the more, ideological determinants of radicalization are not yet fully deciphered, the European landscape reflecting worrisome evolutions.

A reconceptualization of drivers for radicalization implies an on-going debate upon identity politics and its effects against young people (Harper 2018:12), the journey from cognitive radical affinities towards effective radical actions being sometimes difficult to measure. Ascent of populism and youth based disruptive political agendas, as ones already issued in countries as Poland, Bulgaria and Hungary, shadowed the initial optimistic perception upon digital politics, civic activism and claims for

political renewal. Although Romania still defy the lure of populism, the overall European picture speaks about young people scepticism, disavowal of formal, institutional politics and accentuated hostility against immigrant and minorities communities (European Commission, 2015).

Within the light of these ideas, an investigation dedicated to interdependencies raised nowadays amid purposes of intercultural education and improvement of civic accountability and awareness of young Romanians may offer a useful insight upon resilience and sustainability of democracy in the region.

**3.2. Objectives, samples and methods of applied research.** The applied research assumes a qualitative dimension, using the focus group methodology and concentrates on two central objectives:

**Obj.1.** Exploration of correlations appeared amid acquisition of multicultural abilities through formal education means and edification of civic and democratic values in case of young Romanians.

**Obj.2.** Analysis of effects generated by digitalization upon youth identity-building processes, including representation of marginality and stigma and definition of majority and minority groups.

The focus group sessions involved a group of 12 students (age 21 to 28), second year of study, enrolled in the Communication and Public relations programme. Also, the group beliefs and performative identities were successively investigated after a two weeks interspace, wherein they were expected to elaborate an individual essay upon intercultural abilities developed during their study programme. This intermediary step was designed to raise awareness upon role of intercultural conscience in assuming civic landmarks and in building democratic resilience and responsible action models.

The complex qualitative content resulted from the two focus group sessions was organized using the *Multidimensional Model of Intercultural Competence*, stated by Byram (1997:89). The multidimensional model consists in five layers of intercultural competences, starting with attitude factors ("ability to relativize one's self and value others") and including also elements as "knowledge of the rules for individual and social interaction", skills such as "interpreting and relating", associates skills as "discovery and interaction" and not lastly, a "critical cultural awareness" factor.

**3.3. Results of the applied research. Bridging the gap between imagined geographies of exclusion and intercultural competencies, fostering democratic accountability.** Asked to define the main intercultural abilities acquired through interactive and applicative didactic activities, the students tended to highlight elements as tolerance, decreasing stereotypy and diminish of disbeliefs about other cultures or even proximal groups.

Equally, the students affirmed that educational processes revolving around digital resources and intercultural debate topics increased their capacity to act responsible in civic and social contexts. Great majority of the students confirmed that social media, educational platforms and access to foreign literature granted them new interactional skills, but very few testimonies crossed the line of critical awareness. Even if most of the students has taken into consideration the acquisition of new intercultural skills as empathy and understanding of consequences of political decisions upon different individuals, placed in disadvantaged positions, their ability to operationalize these theoretical claims was quite modest.

Under these conditions, the very first research hypothesis, asserting that: **intercultural training, carried through applied didactic activities, could represent a vector for increasing democratic behaviour, tolerance and civic engagement, raising awareness upon different translations and meanings of discrimination**, was only partially confirmed.

Strong background clichés were circulated during the first round debate, the theme of majority and minority cultures raising contradictory responses. Some students claimed that minority cultures, especially those delimited by constrains as marginality and stigma (uneducated or deviant individuals) should be limited in expressing and accessing public decision tools.

Their explanation were targeting arguments as lack of political culture, affinities for populist voting behaviour or even generational tensions. Those types of imagined geographies of exclusion were diminish after the first debate and subsequent to individual training, but they still remain relevant. The intercultural abilities develop trough agency of interactive training (applied didactic activities) didn't cross the test of critical cultural awareness, even during the second focus group session. Marginality and stigma associated to certain socio-economic clusters continued to shadow other arguments as: membership within

specific ethnic groups, religious entities or in migrant or rural communities.

The focus groups reflected that minority and majority cultures were segregated through intervention of arguments as level of formal education and respect for rule of law, the ethnic, the religious and the cultural identities being perceived as less influential. The students manifested strong concerns for promotion of reformist politics, transparent economic policies and growing efficiency of public spending, but their individual contributions through means as volunteering, educational initiatives and ONG membership were still discrete.

Despite the positive outcomes of cross-cultural oriented educational courses, the narratives of the dominant group were still functioning, with some recent updates. This kind of relocation of stereotypes is more visible in case of accessibility within virtual communities. Almost a quarter of the students described the experience of online activism and participation in debate platforms in strong opposition with terms as age, education, income, economic medium.

More specific, they assumed that individuals living in the country side, appertaining to older generations or lacking basic educational and social skills, especially foreign languages competencies, are partially excluded from these new virtual communities. In the same time, it remains important to highlight the danger of reversibility in subject of intercultural openness.

Over 40% of the young people participating in the debates where sceptical about the role of attitude factors and interpreting and relating skills, in case of violent social tensions, escalation of ethnic agendas or religious confrontations. Under these circumstances, an intermediary conclusion tend to detach. The acquirement of multicultural abilities, competencies and skills generate what we may call a cognitive intercultural dimension. What is still lacking is the action pattern, enabling young people to test in practice their beliefs and limits in accepting the challenges of *critical cultural awareness*. The two focus group session enhanced the level intercultural responsiveness, but further steps are needed.

As regards the second research hypothesis, sustaining that **evolutions occurred in formal education curricula and growing influence of cross-cultural medium may enable the establishment of cultural abilities promoting active citizenship**, the focus groups revealed positive results.

In case of students enrolled in communication sciences programs in 2018, the formal education curricula comprise essential courses dedicated to development of intercultural abilities. First year disciplines as *Protocol and organisation of events*, *Rhetorics and argumentation*, *Law in communication* or *Conversational strategies in foreign language* offer a glimpse into different cultural landscapes, opening the road for a deeper understanding of intercultural challenges in communication sciences sphere. First semester of second year includes also disciplines oriented towards intercultural approaches as *Introduction in advertising* or *Strategies and techniques in public relations*.

The relevance of formal curricula in fostering intercultural abilities and active citizenship practices was demonstrated by identification of five key competences: attitude skills in relativize own culture in relation with different foreign cultural models, capacity to detach from traditional ethnocentric perspectives and to understand complex global issues as environmental governance, critical thinking aptitudes used in recognizing media manipulation and fake news, enhanced awareness regarding benefits and costs of voting (role of civil disobedience and long-term outcomes of protest cultures), and increasing openness in favour of interaction and collaboration with disadvantaged, vulnerable or marginalized groups. A peculiarly relevant tendency refers to the mixing of genuine intercultural competencies, as they were presented at the beginning of the focus groups, with civic related attitudes, which were intuitively corroborated with the first set.

The final conclusions, formulated at the end of the second focus group, reflected that 40% of the participants changed their initial perception upon discrimination and civic duties, also benefiting by a clearer perspective upon topics as active citizenship and civic engagement. In the same time 20% of the participants conserved their opinions and stated that some of the present exclusion lines, bases on criteria as education or participation within labour force, should be conserved. At the end of the study, two main set of actions were suggested: (1) Establishment of permanent volunteering programs within universities, in order to foster active citizenship and practical intercultural formation of young students and (2) Introduction within formal curricula of courses dedicated to themes as Human Rights, Anti-Discrimination Law and Intercultural communication and conflict resolution, (the host university offers similar training modules in the postgraduate cycle).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Discourses upon intercultural acceptance and cultural awareness are challenged in these latter days by reigniting communicational pathologies, consisting in fake news proliferation, ascent of suspicion, growing appetite for scapegoating and culpabilization of minorities or groups trapped at the social margins. This ongoing crisis highlighted however the necessity for cultivating intercultural skills and abilities in young people, as the behavioural clauses of democracy and active citizenship models will become essential in limiting future radical or extremis drifts. There is a genuine need to transcend the border between cognitive intercultural abilities and intercultural action and practices, because otherwise we may assist to a malign alchemy of crowd-pleasing politics and youth anti-system populism.

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