

## **THE IMPACT OF THE ROMANIANS' CULTURAL PROFILE ON THEIR CAPACITY TO ADAPT TO AN INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT**

**GABRIELA DUMBRAVĂ \***

**ABSTRACT:** *Starting from the premise that an individual's response to the surrounding environment unfolds within the framework of their cultural background, the paper attempts to detect the way in which the Romanians' individuality as a people influences their openness to intercultural communication, both in everyday life and in business. For this purpose, the study approaches the concept of interculturality as a space where nationally inherited patterns of thought and behavior intersect and, hopefully, merge into a consensual common ground defined as 'the third culture'.*

**KEY-WORDS:** *intercultural communication, diversity management, cultural awareness, global competence, third culture.*

**JEL CLASSIFICATION:** Z13.

### **1. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT**

#### **1.1. Concepts and theories.**

As the sense of the prefix *inter-* suggests, intercultural communication involves "...interaction, exchange, openness, reciprocity, objective solidarity" (Segall, Dasen et al., 1999, p.166). Since intercultural exchange is not limited to national languages, being rather an interplay of subjectivities and symbolic relations, it calls for an interdisciplinary approach, situated at the intersection between linguistics, anthropology, and psychology.

The beginnings of research in the field of intercultural communication date as far back as the 1950's, when the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall, in his books

---

\* Assoc. Prof., Ph.D., University of Petroșani, Romania, [gbrldumbrava@yahoo.com](mailto:gbrldumbrava@yahoo.com)

*The Silent Language* (1959) and *The Hidden Dimension* (1966), differentiates between *high context* and *low context* cultures, setting forth groundbreaking theories about the way in which culture shapes the individuals' perception of space, time, and themselves.

In the hectic 1960's, the movement for civil rights in America led to the gradual assertion of minorities and, implicitly, to an increasing preoccupation for the understanding of alterity. In his 1969 book *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, sets forth the thesis according to which individuals gain access to infinity only by going beyond the limits of the I and opening themselves to the Other: "It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity" (p. 51). Under the circumstances, the encounter with the Other is viewed as a revealing experience that offers limitless perspectives on one's identity, since "the Other precisely reveals himself in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness." (p. 150).

The 1970's were predominated by attempts from specialists in linguistics and social sciences to establish a comprehensive definition of intercultural communication that bring together the concepts of *communication* and *culture*. Thus, in 1972, specialists in communication Larry A. Samovar and Richard Porter published *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, the first collection of texts in the field, which defines communication as "a transactional process that affects the behavior people consciously display in order to produce a specific response in another person" (Samovar & Porter, p.6). The transactional aspect of communication, which ultimately refers to a negotiation of identities and re-assessment of symbolic relations on various levels, places the cultural dimension of communication into a clearer, more productive perspective.

From such perspective, John Condon and Faith Yousef published *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication* (1975), a collection of studies in the field of linguistics, anthropology, international relations, and rhetoric that consolidate the multidisciplinary approach to interculturality and emphasize the importance of self-awareness in dealing with it.

In the 1980's, the development of intercultural communication research was marked by William Gudykunst's theory of *uncertainty* and *anxiety* in relation with *strangers*. These three concepts dealt with in the volumes *Theories in Intercultural Communication* (1988), and *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication* (1989), resuscitate the philosophical concept of 'the Other' and push it towards a more pragmatic territory, common to intercultural communication and diversity management theories in the next two decades. Thus, in *Dynamics of Intercultural Communication* (1995), Carley H. Dodd points out that, since our level of expectation and our responses to communication contexts are culturally shaped, a high degree of awareness is essential for an effective intercultural communication. In other words, when individuals from different cultures come into contact, they should be reciprocally aware of diversity and flexible enough to embrace it.

A few years later, in his book *Of Hospitality* (2000), Jacques Derrida associates the openness towards alterity with the act of welcoming a guest into one's home, and defines it as hospitality. According to the author, this act of generosity,

acceptance and willingness to accommodate is rewarding in the sense that, the more we open towards the Other, the more we expand our perspective on our own identity.

In the twenty-first century, the tendency towards economic globalization, the volatile geographical borders, the massive population migration, and space and time dimensions rendered irrelevant by the progress of technology raise more and more complex issues regarding the local-national-global balance, and the individuals' capacity to function within and across cultural borders. Moreover, the changes brought about by globalization are so rapid that people need to be educated to assimilate and face them. Therefore, nowadays we speak very often about the necessity to cultivate people's *global or intercultural competence*, which is "a range of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills that lead to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures" (NEA 2010, p.1).

According to NEA specialists, global competence consists of four basic elements that ensure efficient integration in the contemporary global community, namely: *international awareness*, *appreciation of cultural diversity*, *proficiency in foreign languages*, and *competitive skills*, supported by "extensive knowledge of international issues", creative thinking, and "a thorough understanding of the economic, social, and technological changes taking place across the globe" (NEA, 2010, pp.3-4).

All the elements above converge to the idea that intercultural competence is shaped at the intersection between the local, the national, and the international and relies on knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of diversity. The question arising at this point is to what extent the cultural background influences people's permeability to diversity and, implicitly, their capacity to acquire intercultural competence.

## **1.2. The Cultural Background and Intercultural Communication: 'The Third Culture'**

Intercultural communication is "the ability to communicate verbally and non-verbally with individuals in other cultures, so that all the participants to communication should encode and decode the conveyed messages, avoiding misinterpretations and erroneous assessments as much as possible" (Hinner, 1998, p. 53). As it follows from this definition, the encoding and decoding process is not confined to verbal messages, but it refers to a series of inherited social-cultural elements, such as:

- **Cultural values** that ensure the continuity and stability of a culture and function as norms, regulating perceptions and social behavior;
- **Attitudes, defined** as "individual predispositions to assess a symbol, an object, an aspect of the world, an event, in a favorable or unfavorable manner (Kabagarama 1996, p. 12);
- **Worldview**, which has to do with people's perception of and relationship with the universe, and the natural and social environment;
- **Social organization** that represents the basic institutions of society, namely: family, the education system, and the community, all being responsible for handing down from generation to generation the system of knowledge and

values meant to preserve the balance and continuity of the respective culture (apud Popescu 2013, pp. 45-49).

Since these elements differ widely across cultures, the premise of successful intercultural communication is to place the encoding-decoding process on a common ground, referred to as 'the third culture', where cultural identities are temporarily suspended in favor of embracing diversity. Thus, 'the third culture' becomes "a bridge that unifies rival, contrasting cultural paradigms into a functional unit [...], by synthesizing the common elements" (Popescu 2013, p. 51). However, specialists draw attention to the fact that 'the third culture', more comprehensive than the original cultures, is not a mere fusion, but a harmonization between them on grounds of their common elements. Moreover, it is important to remember the temporary and circumstantial character of this unifying paradigm, which emerges whenever individuals are willing to override temporarily their cultural backgrounds and adjust their behavior and expectations in order to attain a common goal. Therefore, the characteristics of 'the third culture' are *openness*, *expandability*, *sensitivity to challenges*, and *orientation towards the future* (Casmir 1990, apud Popescu 2013, p. 52).

Extrapolating the above, it can be concluded that the individuals involved in intercultural communication need exactly the same characteristic in order to be efficient. First, they need to be open to diverse interlocutors, willing to renounce stereotypes, prejudices, and taboos or to detect and understand them in the others. Second, they must be flexible and balanced enough to display a cosmopolitan attitude and feel comfortable in diverse cultural spaces. In its turn, cosmopolitanism calls for a capacity to fine-tune responses and behavior in accordance with the cultural context of personal or business encounters. Finally, the conscious orientation towards continuous improvement in terms of global competence should be a priority issue for every individual who aspires to become a genuine citizen of the world.

As any other set of skills, global competence can be improved by education and individual effort. However, as the following sections will show, our cultural background, with the nationalist impulse and the tendency to feel either threatened or intimidated by 'the others' and categorize them according to inherited stereotypes has a serious impact on our capacity to function in a different cultural environment, both in personal life and in business.

## **2. THE ROMANIANS' CULTURAL PROFILE AND ITS IMPACT ON THEIR INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE**

### **2.1. Main Dimensions of the Romanian Cultural Profile**

As early as the 60's of the nineteenth century, Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede laid the foundations of his cultural dimensions theory as a framework of cross-cultural communication. Based on the results of surveys applied to IBM employees all over the world, Hofstede analyzes the way in which culture shapes people's system of values and, implicitly, their behavior in different contexts of communication. The most recent form of the model, successively improved over three decades, contains six

cultural dimensions, namely: individualism vs. collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity vs. femininity, long-term vs short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint (Hofstede 2001).

According to Hofstede's model, Romanian culture displays the following dimensions:

**High power distance**, associated with the acceptance of hierarchy on grounds of fear rather than conviction, which generates negative feelings of frustration, humiliation, and a strong aversion towards authority.

**Collectivism**, which means that the Romanian society is not centered on individual self-assertion, financial independence and the need to create wealth, but on conflicting group interests and the tendency to rely on inherited assets and avoid the effort to achieve new ones.

**High uncertainty avoidance** that reflects the Romanians' low capacity to cope with ambiguity and diversity, which leads to high resistance to change and long-term decisions, as well as the individual's need to melt into the masses for the sake of safety.

**Intermediate long-term/short-term orientation**, a position between past-oriented societies, which glorify traditions and regard novelty with suspicion, and the more pragmatic societies, focused primarily on present change as source of future progress.

**Relative feminism**, which means that Romanian culture underrates competition, personal achievement, and success in favor of equality and solidarity, valuing immediate comfort to the detriment of social status.

**Restraint**, which is a common feature of the former communist countries, where the frustrations of the oppressive regimes left long-lasting scars on the people's mentality. In such societies, the primary focus on the day-to-day subsistence tends to distract attention from the individual's emotional and spiritual, fostering a cynical and pessimistic mentality (Hofstede 2001).

The dimensions above were partly anticipated as early as the turn of the twentieth century by Romanian social psychologist Dumitru Drăghicescu who, in his book *On the Psychology of the Romanian People*, points out that the Romanians' psychological profile was shaped at the intersection of Western and Eastern and cultures. In his opinion, the basic Romanian patterns of thought and behavior are historically accounted for, being the result of successive dominations by foreign cultures, which brought about the following predominant characteristics:

- “the laziness of the spirit [...], self-doubt, passivity, resignation, faith in destiny and luck, and fatalism” (349), all of Byzantine origin;
- the mentality of ‘the unfinished’ and the temporary (447);
- a ‘civic paralysis’, by virtue of which the Romanians are reluctant to initiate change and display little orientation towards the future;
- lack of discipline, order, and method, as well as “a bitter, destructive critical spirit” (535).

Two decades later, psychologist and sociologist Constantin Rădulescu-Motru published his book, *Psychology of the Romanian People*, based on the theory according to which the main dimensions of the Romanians' psychological and cultural profile is justified not only by historic events, but also by the rural forms of social organization

predominated by the power of tradition. Under these circumstances, he detects such characteristics as a strong herd instinct; the lack of tenacity and the tendency to improvise and waste time whenever presented with the opportunity; and the lack of the sense of durability (pp. 23-30).

In his 2015 book *The Psychology of the Romanian People*, based on surveys conducted over a decade, Professor Daniel David corroborates Hofstede's cultural analysis of the Romanian society by identifying the following predominant characteristics of contemporary Romanians:

- *high intellectual and creative potential, poorly capitalized on;*
- *high degree of competitiveness, generated not by the need for self-assertion, but by the frustration of not getting what they think they deserve;*
- *extrinsic motivation for work driven by a strong fear of failure;*
- *low level of happiness and fulfillment in personal life and at work;*
- *gregariousness and high emotionality;*
- *low level of conscientiousness, indiscipline and breaking of social rules;*
- *defensive attitude generated by low self-esteem and inferiority complexes;*
- *low level of autonomy, determination and tenacity in completing begun projects;*
- *skepticism, cynicism, oblivion, and lack of trust in people.* (David 2015, p.306)

## **2.2. The Impact of the Romanians' Cultural Profile On Their Intercultural Business Competence**

As we have shown before, intercultural competence largely depends on our culturally determined permeability to diverse systems of values. The access to the harmonizing space of 'the third culture' is conditioned by the permanent negotiation between inherited perceptions, mentalities and stereotypes and, implicitly, by people's capacity to override them temporarily in order to find common ground for communication in different contexts. Therefore, the six dimensions of Hofstede's cultural model will be discussed in terms of their impact on the Romanians' performance in intercultural business communication.

**The high power distance**, associated with the instinctive aversion towards authority, can seriously impair the ability to establish a positive and productive relation with superiors. In this sense, the perception of authority and the response to it varies according to age groups. Thus, employees in their mid-forties, who have lived their formative years in the communist period, establish hierarchical relations based on the specific cultural patterns of traumatizing totalitarianism. The main features of these relations are: the tendency to disconsider superiors in terms of professional and management competences, an apparent display of respect, and the conviction that they hold management positions undeservingly. From here, the impulse to contest leaders and replace them with new ones without assessing the consequences.

On the other hand, the young generation, born and raised after 1989, often misunderstand the principles of democracy that involve a balance between individual rights and duties, as well as a harmonious relation between professional competence and career development. This, combined with a limited sense of reality specific to

young age, leads to an unreasonable reluctance to cover all the stages of professional and career development in a company and the equally unreasonable claim to high salaries and positions from the start. Moreover, the fact that they are, historically speaking, the 'grandchildren of communism' has a determining impact on their thought, behavior, and perception of reality. Thus, their parents' instinctive struggle to protect their children from the hardships they went through during the totalitarian regime results in an overprotective attitude that fosters immaturity and a low sense of responsibility. In this context, the young, who very often live with their parents or receive the financial support of the latter even well beyond the age of twenty-five, display little to no interest in pursuing a career as a means of making a living and, when they do, they are animated by the desire to earn as much as possible with the least effort. Moreover, when they target a job, they tend to be unrealistic about their professional competences, as well as more preoccupied with the earnings than their personal input to the business. Apart from making a bad impression in job interviews, such attitude undermines the capacity to integrate in a competitive, merit-based organization, where financial satisfaction goes hand in hand with personal commitment.

Actually, this is the reason why the only exceptions to this pattern are to be found with Romanians who work abroad or in multinational companies with foreign senior management located in Romania, where both generations adapt to a quality-oriented environment, stimulated by high financial benefits, proportional to the rigorosity of personnel selection and the pressure of the necessity of professional improvement as a means of keeping one's job.

In close connection with the power distance index, **collectivism** is also a residue of totalitarianism, where self-assertion was regarded as dissidence and sanctioned accordingly. The individual was supposed to be part of the masses that put their efforts together to the service of the communist party and its supreme leader. Moreover, the notion of personal achievement was virtually inexistent, since progress was considered a collective asset meant to validate the policies of the autocratic regime. Some of the after-effects of the oppressive society before 1989 still persist in the conscience of the middle-aged generation, who are definitely better at doing their job than at speaking about it and emphasizing their own merits. In the contemporary business environment, where self-marketing is a crucial skill in securing a job and attaining career progress, this can be a serious impediment. The young generation is much more open in this respect but, unfortunately, their eagerness for self-assertion is not always supported by a valid system of values and realistic self-assessment.

The **high uncertainty avoidance**, which manifests itself as reluctance to change and a tendency to act within the safe limits of routine can also be serious impediment to efficient business behavior. Thus, although the Romanians are known to be creative, their inventive spirit is often hindered by excessive caution when it comes to putting into practice an innovative idea. This feature can also be traced back to communist times, when people were supposed to be doers rather than bearers of initiative. Moreover, the huge factories and plants, where the individuals were simply anonymous parts of a production mechanism were not exactly ideal places for self-assertion. As a matter of fact, the notion of individual accomplishment completely

melted into the communist ideal of collective success to the glory of the party and the supreme leader. Unfortunately, the three decades following the events in 1989 did not bring much improvement in terms of stimulating and supporting individual initiative, since all the successive governments failed to allocate sufficient funds for research and the implementation of innovations. This oblivion on the part of the high officials actually pushed many creative people beyond the border, to more friendly economic environments, where they could capitalize their creative potential. In the long run, the economic consequences on a national level are devastating, since the young generation, many of them winners of international olympics, massively leave the country to study abroad and never to come back.

Sadly, this is just one of the many examples of how governmental lack of long-term vision can undermine national economy with serious consequences for many years to come.

Our intermediate position on the **long-term/short-term orientation** scale describes us as a nation which is both past-oriented, valuing its cultural inheritance, and future-oriented, with a pragmatic focus on change as source of progress. This result of Hofstede's survey calls for detailed discussion, since it is the only one that *seems* to have a positive meaning for our economic, social, and cultural evolution. Therefore, we are going to show how this index is just apparently positive, in the sense that the Romanians do display both tendencies, but they seem to have manifested them either in the wrong way or at the wrong moment.

Thus, the determination to do away with the communist past in the first years after 1989 turned into a chaotic and undiscerning destruction of an entire **economic** system, competitive on a European and even global level at the time. As a result, the first twenty years after 1989 were dedicated to a furious shutting down of factories and plants, their equipment being sold as scrap metal and the premises auctioned and sold for ridiculous prices to local or foreign businesses. Agricultural associations were also condemned to dissolution, being considered unwanted relics of the totalitarian regime. Alongside with them, agricultural equipment and irrigation systems were left in decay, whereas once fertile fields, orchards, vineyards and farms were abandoned by their owners, no longer capable of managing them individually. Most of these ended up sold to more or less obscure businesses from the country or from abroad, which opened the way for massive cereal, fruit, and meat imports. All this happened alongside with massive deforestation and the mining of precious metals by foreign companies that were granted exploitation rights by our government, to the detriment of the Romanian economy at large, but with huge profits for corrupt officials. At the other extreme, our past orientation seemed to wrongly prevail, when the same government officials decided on several occasions to reject business proposals profitable for national economy in the long run, based on the demagogic slogan "we would not sell our country".

The **social** consequences of such delirious policy of self-enrichment were the dissolution of the middle class, which is the motor of any economy, and the deepening of the cleavage between the very few rich and the poor majority. Besides, the massive unemployment generated by the destruction of industry led to unprecedented migration phenomenon, which disrupted individual and family life.

As far as the **cultural** heritage is concerned, the Romanians display the same indifference as in the case of natural assets. The frantic desire to sever any connections with the past and the fascination of 'the outside' in the aftermath of the events in 1989 made the Romanians automatically dismiss anything that was local or national as inferior to what 'the others' had, and blindly adopt Western models, from food and clothing to traditions and holidays. The result of this attitude is that the young generation knows less and less about our national history and is virtually ignorant of our ancient culture. Ironically, the resurrection of the interest in the national culture was brought about precisely by the western ideology of sustainability and diversity, which has gained ground in Romania over the past decade. Hopefully, this will make the Romanians understand that past and present orientation do not exclude each other but, on the contrary, they are complementary patterns of thought and behavior that develop by reciprocal reinforcement and assertion.

By virtue of a **relative feminism** pointed out in Hofstede's survey, the Romanians are culturally focused on equality and solidarity, underrating competition and personal achievement. This is somewhat true both for the middle-aged and the young generation, although the reasons are different. For the middle-aged, this pattern of thought and behavior stems from the education received in their childhood and youth. Before 1989, the communist regime based its policy on the doctrine of egalitarianism, which promoted equality between social classes and individuals in terms of economic status and civil rights. On the other hand, like all the totalitarian regimes, communism fostered solidarity as a means of survival. In this context, people's sense of competition was not supported by the desire to achieve individual satisfaction, but rather to live up to the high standards of social expectation. In other words, one strove to be the best not in exchange for material benefits, but for collective acknowledgement, or simply because there were no other options for professional achievement. On the other hand, the competitiveness of the young generation has been dramatically blunted by the lack of economic and social pressure, as well as by the radical change in the system of values. Thus, even when it manifests itself, they sense of competition with the young generation focuses not as much as on *doing* more, but on *having* more than their peers, generally from sources independent from their own effort. This lack of social maturity sustained by a system of values according to which success is a matter of favorable circumstances rather than of individual effort and personal achievement is equated with material possessions rather than with professional performance, prompts the young to value the immediate inherited comfort to the detriment of a social status achieved as a result of individual commitment.

Finally, the pessimistic and cynical mentality pertaining to the high index of restraint underlies most of the other features in the Romanians' psychological profile, from their short-time orientation and lack of commitment to their low self-esteem and destructive critical spirit.

## CONCLUSIONS

As we have shown above, culturally inherited patterns influences every level of human interaction, from day-to-day encounters to business collaboration. In order to be

efficient in the global business environment and gain access to the space of the ‘third culture’, the Romanians need to be aware of their own heritage and willing to reconsider it from a global perspective. This is a complex process that involves a fundamental paradigm shift on the level of the Romanian social institutions, meant to yield globally adaptable citizens, who need to be positive, self-assertive, open to diversity and capable of becoming citizens of the world without losing their national identity.

#### REFERENCES:

- [1]. Condon, J.C., Yousef, F.S. (1975) *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication*, Macmillan
- [2]. David, D. (2015) *Psihologia poporului român*, Polirom, Iași
- [3]. Derrida, J. (2000) *Of Hospitality*, Stanford University Press
- [4]. Dodd, C.H. (1997) *Dynamics of Intercultural Communication*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., McGraw-Hill Humanities
- [5]. Drăghicescu, D. (2013) *On the Psychology of the Romanian People*, Vicovia
- [6]. Gudykunst, W.B., Mody, B.M. (2001) *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Sage Publications
- [7]. Hall, E.T. (1973) *The Silent Language*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Anchor Books
- [8]. Hall, E.T. (1990) *The Hidden Dimension*, Random House
- [9]. Hinner, M.B. (1998) *The Importance of Intercultural Communication in a Globalized World*, Peter Lang Publishing
- [10]. Hofstede, G. (2001) *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations across Nations*, Sage
- [11]. Hofstede, G. *Hofstede Insights*, <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/romania/> [Accessed March 13, 2017]
- [12]. Kabagarama, D., (1993) *Breaking the Ice: A Guide to Understanding People from Other Cultures*, Allyn & Bacon
- [13]. Kim, Y.Y., Gudykunst, W.B. (eds.), (1988) *Theories in Intercultural Communication*, Sage Publications
- [14]. Levinas, E. (1969) *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*. Duquesne University Press
- [15]. National Education Association (NEA) (2010) *Preparing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Students for a Global Society. An Educator's Guide to the Four Cs*, <http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/A-Guide-to-Four-Cs.pdf>, [Accessed March 13, 2017]
- [16]. Popescu, S. (2013) *Comunicarea interculturală. Paradigmă pentru managementul diversității*, Institutul European, Iași
- [17]. Rădulescu-Motru, C. (2012) *Psychology of the Romanian People*, Paideia
- [18]. Samovar, L.A. et al. (2011) *Intercultural Communication. A Reader*, 13<sup>th</sup> ed., Cengage Learning
- [19]. Segall, M.H., Dasen, P.R. et al. (1999) *Human Behavior in Global Perspective: An Introduction to Cross-cultural Psychology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Needham Heights, MA