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Students’ perception of discrimination against minorities

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Abstract

The present research aims to identify students’ perceptions and attitudes regarding discrimination of vulnerable groups on the basis of race or ethnicity, religion or belief, age or disability, or of sexual orientation. The study was conducted on 140 students. The purpose of the study was to create knowledge by understanding the current state and to identify training needs and areas needing improvement. Further, this study attempts to shift the educational focus from creating expertise, to the development of socio-emotional skills in academic settings which in turn will result in pro-social behavior among students, inspired from the European citizenship philosophy.

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1. Introduction

In the Dictionary of Sociology, discrimination is defined as a treatment of an individual or group of individuals based on their belonging to a certain “class” or “category”. Discrimination also refers to a certain behavior that a person, an institution or a group of people, adopt against the members of that class or category. This may involve the exclusion or limitation of the discriminated group members against access to exercise of certain rights and opportunities that are otherwise available to other groups (Gidens, 2009).

In a review of Oxford Index (A Search and Discovery Gateway), discrimination against social groups may be the result of the tacitly adhering to social norms or existing institutional and organizational rules. Additionally,
cultural norms, associated beliefs, prejudices, stereotypes, ethnocentrism, closed group are listed as possible causes of discrimination. Discrimination is an action or an approach that exclude, disadvantage or simply differentiate individuals or groups of individuals, based on attributes or personal characteristics. Discrimination is studied by a wide range of disciplines, sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology, economics in order to clarify and describe the contexts in which discrimination occurs, the conditions that generate it, the associated factors etc. From a sociological perspective (e.g.) discrimination may be an explanatory phenomenon for social stratification, generated by the unequal distribution of the community members, resources, material and social benefits, political rights and hence the reflection of the power struggles. Definition of discrimination is seen as a difficult task by most experts involved in the field. Discrimination may be direct or indirect and multiple connotations as follows: harassment, victimization, attaining the dignity of the person etc. Phenomena that are usually associated to discrimination are racism, sexism, stereotypes and also, discriminatory actions and behaviors.

Social status of different groups of people is relative to their origin (regardless of sex, age, race, religion, etc.) as well as to their contribution through work to the global wealth. Despite the legitimacy of “natural equality”, several forms of discrimination including discrimination within the family; treatment in the justice system; conditional access or “slowed” acces to education; favoritism in the “labor sphere” and social rise; ethnic discrimination and racial practices; discriminated and discriminating minorities challenge people regardless of their origin and social status (Mițode, 2004).

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, proclaimed by the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union on December 7, 2000 at the Nice European Council, states in the Article 21(1) that “all forms of discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited”. The inclusion of the fundamental rights of the citizens in the Treaty of Lisbon implies that the European institutions and Member States are legally obliged to respect these rights. The issue of social discrimination, alongside with all of the phenomena it involves (e.g. exclusion, marginalization, social injustice, abuse, labeling, and humiliation, etc.) continues to affect the European society, despite the consistent formative and sanctioning efforts undertaken in recent decades.

2. The EU Report on the Situation of Minority Rights in Romania, June 2014

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) of the European Council, an independent organism of human rights monitoring with expertise in issues of racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and intolerance, issued on 19 March 2014, The Report on the Situation of Minority Rights in Romania, between 2008 - 2013. Since the publication of ECRI’s previous report (21 February 2006), the Commission notes that, in our country was made significant progress in terms of preventing and fighting against discrimination, but, however, some problems persist and continue to worry the European community.

The setting up of an advisory Council of the Churches and Religious Denominations to prevent conflicts between different religious communities is a positive development. So is the amendment of the Criminal Code which has made racist motivation an aggravating circumstance for all offences. The People's Advocate can now examine petitions by legal persons that could not have complained to him before. Several measures have been taken to combat prejudice against the Roma; and the number of police officers belonging to national/ethnic minorities has increased.

However, various religious associations continue having difficulties in obtaining official recognition and registration, despite a new law. There is still no act regulating the status of national minorities. Nor is there a single institution that systematically collects data on the breach of criminal law provisions against racism. In addition, information indicates that the judiciary could enforce these provisions more forcefully. More funding is needed for the National Council for Combating Discrimination to be able to function adequately. Finally, it noted that stigmatizing statements against Roma are common in political discourse.

In its report, ECRI has made a number of recommendations to the authorities, among which the following three require priority implementation and will be revisited in two years:
the general public should be informed about the criminal law provisions against racism and instances which can provide assistance;

- a comprehensive data-collection system should be devised on the application of criminal law provisions against racism;

- strong impetus should be given to the Strategy on the Inclusion of the Roma Minority and all obstacles to its implementation should be removed and sufficient funds allocated (Raportul ECRI privind România, 2014)

ECRI’s recommendations that were made to the Romanian authorities for prior implementation in a maximum of two years are included in Articles 193 to 199 of Chapter VIII of the report, titled “Education and Awareness”. The following recommendations were subject to further exploration through this research:

- Designing curriculas which reflect the cultural diversity of Romania and inform students about the contribution of minority groups to the country's history; all derogatory references about groups / minorities must be removed from textbooks;

- Including in the teacher’s training program, topics related to respect for cultural diversity to ensure proper education is available for students with different cultural backgrounds;

- Conducting awareness campaigns to inform the public about criminal law provisions on fighting racism;

- Ensuring ongoing information of the victims about relevant and qualified institutions available to assist them and / or repair injustice;

- Establishing a comprehensive system for collecting data on the application of criminal laws against racism and racial discrimination; ensuring the application of penalties with a real dissuasive effect, without reducing the maximum punishment provided by law for such offenses;

- Allocate sufficient funds to National Council for Combating Discrimination and other specialized institutions and empower the implementation “strategy for Roma”.

3. Studies in the field of discrimination in Romania

- A study coordinated by Vasile Miftode in 2005, which included respondents that graduated high school from both, rural and urban areas, revealed the following forms of discrimination including a wide range of discrimination criteria: ethnicity, race (23.2%); social status (17.2%); religious orientation (17%); sexual orientation (11.6%); age (4.5%); political beliefs (5.8%); level of education (2.9%); poor (2.6%); HIV-positive individuals (1.6%) etc. (Miftode, Morariu, 2010);

- A “Barometer survey on discrimination in Romania” conducted by Metro Media Transilvania in 2005 on a sample of 1223 people aged 18 and over, revealed the main groups most exposed to discrimination: Roma (22%), poor people (22%), disabled people (21%) and old people (18%). In a smaller but also relevant extent, there are: gays, women in general and pregnant women in particular, and members of religious cults;

- The research “Dynamics Identity in Romania: Value Profiles”, coordinated by Rusu & Comșa in 2008, presents the profiles of Romanians in the context of social changes in the last 20 years. The dimensions discussed and analysed were: religiosity, perception of authority, tolerance of deviance, ethnic discrimination at work, openness etc. In 2008, the authors found a decrease of self-identification of people with conservative values, traditional values (religiosity, the idea of authority, intolerance and discrimination) and an increase of identification with openness (social-liberal attitudes, affordability, personal development, etc.). Starting with 2008, the differences between the value systems of the Romanians in urban and in rural areas began to fade and the authors noted that the economic development during the period, the integration in the EU and its consequences (e.g. free circulation in the European area, various types of migration, adopting rules and regulations common to EU etc.) might be the explanatory factors of this change;

- Multiple discrimination is a concept introduced in the Romanian literature in 2008 by a team of researchers, coordinated by Laura Grünberg in a report of the National Agency for Equal Opportunities. Multiple discrimination means the cumulating of identities or sub-identities that characterize an individual, and are representative for his personality, in different moments of his existence. Based on social “multiple” identity and their coexistence at a given time, the authors discussed the possibility of multiple discrimination, double or additional, each representing an aggravating factor for the other forms. For example, a poor woman, aged 40 years
and Roma, with low education will find with extreme difficulty a place on the labor market and is vulnerable in at least four ways: age, ethnicity, economic status and education. The “National Strategy for the Implementation of Equal Opportunities for All” (2007), of the Romanian Government, the multiple identities of potential victims of discrimination are strictly and artificial defined and requires separate approaches in terms of legislation and policy design. At the European level there are animated discussions with respect to manifestation of discrimination including “inequities hierarchy” and “discrimination criteria conflict”, concepts important to identify different degrees of protection, priority for action and coverage of various grounds of discrimination (Grünberg, Borza, 2008).

The research conducted by TNS CSOP Romania between 2011-2012, commissioned by the National Council for Combating Discrimination, highlighted the perceptions and attitudes with regards to discrimination by studying a sample of 1400 people over 18 years. Key findings of the research are as follows: 51% of Romanians believe that the phenomenon of discrimination is one of the current problems, while 44% disagree with this opinion; the most discriminated social groups according to the respondents are Roma people and physical or mental disable persons, people with HIV and people struggling with homelessness related issues as well as orphans and drug addicts; 31% of the respondents considered that the integration in EU, increased discrimination against Roma people and the elderly; 53% believe that discrimination increases because the economic crisis and the poverty of the population; 31% of Romanians state that they would not feel comfortable around homosexual persons, and 22% of people claimed reported that they would not feel comfortable around people infected with HIV while 15% reported discomfort around Roma people. Researchers have indicated that women aged over 50 years, medium level of education (high school or secondary school graduated) and rural residents are more likely to discriminate.

4. Purpose of the study

This research examines the attitudes of students towards the main disadvantaged groups and/or at risk of social exclusion. This research is guided by the “equal opportunities” principles developed to protect all minority groups in the main sectors of social life and also considers national commitment to contribute to the formation of a new generation of young people equipped with all skills required for a smooth integration in an inclusive European society. Higher education sector has a critical role of providing training to young generation to help them develop professional skills and competences, but also, the responsibility to educating them regarding the fundamental human rights values so important to be fully understood in order to live and work in multicultural environments, and be members of diverse ethnic communities in an inclusive society.

It is our belief that critical thinking, reflexivity, sensitivity to the needs of otherness, a sense of justice and equity in relationships with others, appreciation of human dignity, should place an equal importance in the education process as the focus on developing the theoretical foundation, knowledge and skills.

Therefore, in a first phase of the study, we aimed to explore the attitudes and values regarding discrimination of students enrolled in various study programs, in order to understand the current reality, and identify the ways and means for educational design with the hope to improve the educational process to building and reinforcing desirable behaviors needed to when interacting with minorities.

5. Research methodology

5.1. Hypotheses

Our first hypothesis was developed to highlight significant differences between male and female subjects in terms of perception and rights of minority groups. Theoretically, this hypothesis is based on the assumption of the existence of two types of ethics, the rational (in terms of cost-benefit) associated with manhood and the affective (in terms of concern) associated with womanhood / femininity.

The second hypothesis was built starting from the assumption that there are significant differences among the attitudes and values universe of students in humanities (i.e. psychology, social work, law and public administration, history) as compared to those students enrolled in technical specializations (i.e. engineering, mathematics, computer science, etc.).
5.2. Research instruments

For the purposes of our study, we developed a questionnaire that included 40 items and a five-step Likert rating scale, where 1 indicates “strong disagreement” and 5 “strong agreement” with the contents of each item. The questionnaire items were grouped in 5 main dimensions, corresponding to 5 grounds of discrimination: race and ethnicity, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation (Manual antidiscriminare, 2005). Through the application of this data collection tool, views of the respondents were sought with respect to the following: the importance of racial and ethnic origin of people (with specific reference to Roma representatives); the nature of relationships between people; the level of acceptance of marriage between partners of different nationalities (race and ethnicity); the rights of religious minorities groups (religion); the risk of discrimination in accessing employment by young people and the elderly (age); the situation of disabled persons in the society (disability); and issues of homosexuality (sexual orientation).

5.3. Subjects

The study sample included 140 students, aged between 19 and 37 years old (including 70 women and 70 men), enrolled in the first, second and third year of study, 70 from humanities faculties and 70 from technical specialities.

6. Findings and results

The first research hypothesis was confirmed by the statistically significant differences between male and female students regarding perception of minority groups and their rights. The analysis of responses to key items is summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Differences in questionnaire items between men and women

|                                | Women | Men | p-value (Student’s t-test) |
|--------------------------------|-------|-----|---------------------------|
| I agree with policies to support Roma | 3,23  | 2,69| p<0,01                    |
| I believe the study of religion in schools should be mandatory | 3,64  | 3,07| p<0,05                    |
| I believe that gay marriage should be accepted | 2,70  | 2,21| p<0,05                    |
| I believe that gays should have the right to adopt a child | 2,57  | 2   | p<0,05                    |
| I agree that homosexuality is a disease | 2,24  | 3,07| p<0,01                    |
| I think the chances of a homosexual to be a pedophile are much higher than for a heterosexual | 2,41  | 2,93| p<0,01                    |
| I think that homosexuality is a threat to society | 2,71  | 3,16| p<0,05                    |

As it can be seen, women show greater levels of tolerance in two main aspects of discrimination included in our research: ethnicity and sexual orientation. Especially regarding the latter, we note that the attitude differences between men and women were revealed by no less than 5 different items of our questionnaire (taking into account that there were a total number of 8 items corresponding to this dimension). However, when it came to religion, women showed less tolerance than men by endorsing the mandatory study of religion in schools. Of course, we can assume that women are simply more inclined toward spiritual values and religion, and put the answer on account of this inclination rather than discrimination. On the other hand, we can think that, because women tend to be more conservative than men in general, they are more reluctant to accept a diversity of religions and they endorse the study of the one religion that is both their own and the official one (thus we can, indeed, assign the answer to a form
of discrimination). Further study is required in order to reveal the extent to which each of these factors accounts for the variability of the attitude towards the study of religion in schools.

In order to verify the second hypothesis, we stratified the sample in two groups of subjects: students in humanities (Social Work, Law, History and Political Science, Humanities, Psychology and Theology) and students from technical faculties (Automotives, Electromechanical, Electronics, Geography of Tourism, Horticulture, Mechanical Engineering, Marketing, Mathematics and Computer Science). The differences between “humanists” and “technical students” are statistically significant for the main survey items and highlighted the following:

Table 2. Differences in questionnaire items between technical students and humanists

| Item                                                                 | Technical students | Humanists | p-value (Student’s t-test) |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------|---------------------------|
| I often hear stories that put Roma in a bad light around me          | 2.72               | 3.09      | p<0.05                    |
| I agree with policies to support Roma                                | 2.63               | 3.37      | p<0.01                    |
| I find marriages between Romanians and Roma acceptable               | 3.13               | 3.49      | p<0.05                    |
| I find marriages between Romanians and Hungarians acceptable         | 3.15               | 3.61      | p<0.01                    |
| I believe the study of religion in schools should be mandatory       | 3.09               | 3.71      | p<0.01                    |
| I believe that gay marriage should be accepted                       | 2.22               | 2.76      | p<0.05                    |
| I believe that gays should have the right to adopt a child           | 2.07               | 2.58      | p<0.01                    |
| I think retirees are a drag to society                               | 2.71               | 2.36      | p<0.05                    |
| I agree that homosexuality is a disease                              | 2.99               | 2.20      | p<0.01                    |
| I think the chances of a homosexual to be a pedophile are much higher than for a heterosexual | 2.90               | 2.37      | p<0.01                    |
| I think that homosexuality is a threat to society                    | 3.15               | 2.65      | p<0.05                    |

We note that, with one exception (an item concerning age), significant differences were revealed in exactly the same three dimensions which revealed differences between men and women (race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and religion). Moreover, we can see that the actual items that were answered to differently by the two groups are mostly the same that revealed differences between men and women. Also, although humanists seemed to be more tolerant than technical students in most of the above aspects (in spite of the fact that, for example, according to their statements, they heard more stories that put Roma in a bad light), the mandatory study of religion in schools placed the former on the less tolerant side. And, once again, as in the case of the comparison between men and women, we can explain the attitude towards the study of religion in schools either by the naturally greater interest of humanists in religion as a humanistic field, or by their favoring their own religion (which coincided with the official religion studied in schools) and thus discriminating others.

Tacit premises of this hypothesis assert either that people who participate in an academic humanistic curriculum are more open to human values or, the specificity of their study profiles plays an important role as a differentiation element for the attitudinal outcomes. Differentiating between the two however, requires a diachronic further study.

7. Conclusions

Our study shows that female are generally more tolerant than male students on social discrimination,
especially regarding the issue of homosexuality, confirming the wider hypothesis regarding the higher tolerances of women relative to men. This study does not allow us to draw generalizing conclusions of relationship between innate versus acquired behavior and it is consistent with the theories of attitudinal differences between genders as highlighted by the Western culture. Further, this study confirms also that women are highly dominant in professions like education or social work, where the sensitivity, empathy, understanding and appreciation of otherness and diversity are capital values. On the other hand, the study shows that students from humanities are generally more open to the minorities issue and have greater respect for their rights as compared to their colleagues from sciences or engineering. Although it is possible that individuals attached to humanities values are more likely to choose mainly a humanities academic route, we believe that curricular elements have their contribution in this differentiation. Interpersonal solidarity is not a given but a social construct lifted up on native predispositions.

There are two social construct vectors - cultural narratives and life experiences – which generate two ways of action. The first one concerns the need to include in the academic curricula topics seeking moral and civic education of future specialists from the technical area in order to induce emotional, attitudinal and moral value and subsequent behavioral changes. A minimal intervention in this direction would be the incorporation of Ethics and Deontology in the curricula to increase awareness among students about the moral bases of relating to others given the social and professional norms. On the other hand, in the same line of thinking with Rorty (1998: 29), who claims that “solidarity is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and suffering of others, of people that we do not know”, our research findings point out the usefulness of voluntary activities among students. For example, volunteerism and pro-social behaviors can be encouraged and supported among students by offering bonuses and extra credits for participating in various internship programs, student camps.

A limitation of our study in its present state is that it only used questionnaire data, but we intend to corroborate the results and extend the research by using previous research data, from Romanian studies on discrimination dating from the EU integration up to now, in order to more rigorously assess the country’s progress in this matter. Another possible limitation regards the possibilities of intervention on the curricula in order to include more elements of civic education, given the fact that the criteria of education quality control organisms may sometimes prove to be restrictive of modifications. Optional courses are, however, a feasible solution.

Future studies will focus on the correlations between different forms of discrimination, in an attempt to highlight the structure of discriminating attitudes, i.e. how much are they accounted for by a general attitude of rejection of diversity and how much by specific ones, towards certain categories. Also, we will attempt to further analyse the influence of curricula on these attitudes in the case of students in fields of humanities.

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