Social Distance from Vulnerable Groups. Perspectives from Students from Suceava County

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Abstract

The article aims to explore the social distance of high-school students towards certain vulnerable categories (people with disabilities, those of different religions, those without income, foreigners, refugees, Romani, people infected with HIV, homosexuals), as well as identifying the manner in which these social categories are discriminated against at school and in other public places. In the context of the current study, social distance is expressed through the level of acceptance by the respondents of persons from the aforementioned categories, as neighbours, classmates and friends. Our study shows the students' reluctance to co-exist with certain categories of vulnerable persons by stigmatizing and using social exclusion (homosexuals, Romani, people infected with HIV, immigrants). These aspects draw attention to the need to fight against ethnocentric, xenophobic or homophobic attitudes in school. At the same time, the study shows that the manifestation of intolerant attitudes coincides in many cases with the posture of victim of discriminatory manifestations.

Keywords: social distance, vulnerable groups, *tolerance*

Introduction

School represents a very important life context for children and teenagers, since they spend a significant amount of time in this space. Thus, the quality of school life depends a lot on the nature and quality of the interactions with classmates and teachers. The purpose of our study is to explore one of the factors that carries a great weight over the manner of structuring communication in the school environment. The interpersonal distance – or the distance between groups, physical and/or symbolic, represents a factor that cannot be ignored if we want to decipher the manner in which daily interactions are held.

Studies in the field of social psychology have tried to unravel the manner in which social distance influences the quantity and quality of communication, putting forward proposals to overcome the obstacles created by the aforementioned problem. The prior briefing of each individual, the awareness of personal bias, the increase in interactions with representatives of a different group and the establishment of common goals can reduce social distance and facilitate communication. The above strategies have the immediate effects of pointing out similarities and common perspectives, leading thus to a peaceful coexistence in a multicultural environment.

Theoretical framework of the researched problem

The measurement of intolerance in modern societies puts forward an entire series of problems, since prejudice and discrimination are becoming more and more well-disguised (Bourhis, Gagnon, Moise, 1997, apud. Sandu, D., 2003, pp. 152-154).

Social distance constitutes a constant preoccupation of researchers in the field of Sociology. Currently being studied to understand ethnicity, social classes, gender, race, status, etc, social distance proves to have an important impact on the manner in which individuals traditionally relate to one another, but also for the relatively new type of relationships, from the perspective of social research.

The finality of the supposed path of the concept of social distance has led to equating this with a lack of openness towards interacting with other individuals, perceived as different due to their inclusion in classes that are not part of one's own group, based on criteria deemed as correct.

The uniqueness of the concept of social distance lies in the fact that it is a group phenomenon, existing as long as it can be found in the assessments of members typical for the groups involved and is expressed in the interactions these choose to have or not with members of out-groups, sometimes concerning complementarity idea. The literature specifies that in analysing social distance, one takes into account the modal behaviour of the group, and not the individualized one.

From this perspective, the emancipated person with pioneering views and initiatives presents a less substantial relevance than the average individual with their conventional perceptions and beliefs. The concept of social distance becomes relevant from the perspective of the fact that it allows us to measure and operate with the intensity of the prejudices we have towards social groups. During an investigation conducted on Romanians aged 18 and upwards (1406 respondents), 2 out of 3 Romanians believe that discrimination is a prevalent problem, manifesting itself fairly often in Romania. According to the dominant perspective, the most commonly discriminated groups are those of people infected with HIV/AIDS (65%), drug addicts (57%), people with physical or mental disabilities (55%). Almost half of the respondents have mentioned on the next level: those of Romani ethnicity (49%), those with a different sexual orientation (49%), and children from institutions. As far as the factors leading to discrimination are concerned, the participants have mentioned as main reasons lack of information and education regarding discrimination, as well as the indifference of certain people where others are concerned.

Another study creates a diagnosis for respecting civil rights, exploring the ethos in 8 pilot-schools and the way this manifests itself in opportunities or obstacles form respecting the rights of children (UNICEF,2007). In high school, the students' perception shows that in that environment the most frequent criteria of discrimination have to do with physical appearance, school performance and social class. Nevertheless, the intensity of the discrimination is not perceived as extremely high. The students admit they themselves are responsible for discriminatory acts (34.5%), the main reason being a low level of tolerance, as the study concludes.

In the context of analysing manifestations of intolerance within the educational environment, a special place is taken up by the attitudes of the teachers, as well as by institutional practices. A recent study, conducted by a group of professors from the University of Babeş-Bolyai, indicates the fact that the teachers' level of social tolerance is quite low. Thus, teachers tend to be more reluctant to accept the proximity of immigrants, of persons of a different race or religion or those speaking a

different language. According to this study, teachers are in favour of practices of social segregation of Romani children. The conclusion of the study shows that a significant number of teachers is not ready to work with students who bear the burden of an unfavourable social history and that the educational system amplifies these difficulties.

Another subtle form of discrimination has been analysed in the context of encouraging competitiveness between schools, as a result of introducing the "market logic" to school politics. Competitiveness between schools often becomes a fight for students, leading to a kind of elitism that questions the principle of equal access to education. The schools' focus on rentability, efficiency, cognitive excellence does not always encourage educators to adopt inclusion strategies for students with learning difficulties or with an inability to adapt to the school environment. Approaching this problematic framework, V. Iosifescu (2004, p.85) remarks on the possibility that the elitism of certain classes or schools can actually be a way in which the interests of privileged socio-cultural groups manifest itself, according to a theory put forward by Pierre Bourdieu (1970). The author's arguments stress the types of discrimination experienced by students from certain social environments: the materials of the school vary significantly even within the same school, the allocation of material and human resources introducing certain differences. Thus, the first grouped in elite classrooms have the best teachers, the best rooms and even a convenient timetable (as far as grouping the classes by days is concerned). Following pressure from the parents (with solid socio-economical positions) they are also given certain optional subjects or foreign languages to study. All these take place within a democratic framework, taking into account the school's autonomy.

The teachers' attitudes to students influence the socio-metrical status of the students within a class. It has been proven that a teacher's positive attitude to students influences that student's social status in class (appreciated, liked by his classmates, popular) and a negative attitude towards some students prompts rejection from the classmates (Ochoa, G. *et al*. ,2007, p.779). Most studies reveal that, generally, pedagogical actions leading to the discrimination of certain students (ethnic or gender discriminations or those prompted by the family's socio-economical background) are not intentional (Jigău, M., 2006, p. 154). Although teachers might be less aware of their injustices through their preferences or dislikes, the effects are perceived clearly by students. These effects are more serious as some students already suffer from inferiority complexes due to their socio-economical status. Thus, students coming from a less advantageous socio-economic background have the tendency of underestimating themselves when faced with the other, privileged students (Stan, E., 2003, p. 44).

The perception of the just characteristic of the procedures and relational treatment from within organizations was studied in the larger context of evaluating the quality of the school climate in correlation with the anti-social behaviour of certain students (Gottfredson, 2001; Hawkins & Lishner, 1987; LeBlanc, Swisher, Vitaro & Tramblay, 2008; Welsh, 2000; Wilcox & Clayton, 2001). The students are especially sensitive to a teacher's fairness. Studies have explained that, in fact, people's desire to be treated fairly by authorities corresponds to certain fundamental needs: the need to have control over one's own life, the need to belong and to have self-esteem (Cropanzano,

Byrne, Bobocel & Rupp, 2001). If people feel they are being treated fairly, they have greater faith in themselves, and also in the authorities.

An important indicator for the entrance of intolerance in the school environment is *the degree of inclusion,* seen as a process of reaction to the diversity of the students' needs, by encouraging the participation of all students in their education and by valuing independent participation equally. A survey conducted in 2015 on a sample of 652 students from Suceava county, has tracked the perception of equity and inclusion in the school environment (Bujorean, E., 2017). The analysis of the data concluded that students from a *technological field* appreciate the inclusive character less favourably, compared to the students from the theoretical field. It is possible that classes from the technical field could have more students belonging to non-dominant social classes. These students assess that they feel less safe in the school space, they are rewarded less frequently for their results, they do not receive equal support from the teachers in order to set higher goals when finishing school, and the didactic staff don't involve themselves so much in discouraging certain negative attitudes towards students from less privileged environments. The study also stresses that students from *the rural area* unlike those from the urban areas, feel the staff do not involve themselves in discouraging negative attitudes towards less privileged students, including making fun of those speaking with regional accents (Bujorean, E., 2017, p.167). The data indicates that there are categories of students that might feel confused by the cultural differences from the school environment and that of the community they belong to, and who do not receive support at school in order to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers.

Research methodology
The purpose of our study deals with exploring the social distance of high-school students towards certain vulnerable categories (people with disabilities, those of different religions, those without income, foreigners, refugees, Romani, people infected with HIV, homosexuals), as well as identifying the manner in which these social categories are discriminated against at school and in other public places. In the context of the current study, *social distance* is expressed through the level of acceptance by the respondents of persons from the aforementioned categories, as neighbours, classmates and friends.

The objectives of the study were the following:
Assessment of social distance towards the aforementioned vulnerable categories;
Appreciation of the students' perception of the manner in which people from vulnerable categories are discriminated against in school and in public places;
Identification of the percentage of students who have experienced situations of discrimination;
Identification of causes that have led to certain situations of discrimination experienced by students.
The sample of respondents was made up of 200 students aged between 16 and 19, from four high-schools in Suceava county, two from the rural environment and two from the urban area. The instrument of research included a questionnaire applied to the students who had taken part in the *Tolerance Week* program of information and counseling, which took place in November 2016.

Discussions and results

A measure of social distance and intolerance is the refusal to interact in one's daily life with certain people. Using a scale of social distance adapted to Bogardus' scale, the respondents expressed their willingness to accept s neighbor, colleague and friend from 1 to 5 (1=completely disagree; 2= partially disagree; 3= neither agree nor disagree; 4= partially agree; 5= totally agree).

According to our data (see Graph 1), students expressed their complete disagreement to accepting as neighbours people of Romani ethnicity (MD=2,42), those of a different sexual orientation (MD=2,64), those infected with HIV (MD=2,8), as well as immigrants (MD=2,92). Having as neighbours people with disabilities or those of a different religion seems to be accepted, most answers being on average 4 (partial agreement). The tolerance of high-school students seems to be a little higher when it comes to accepting as classmates the aforementioned categories, while the same tendency remains when it comes to friendships. If in the case of those of Romani ethnicity the willingness to have friendly relationships is higher than with neighbourly relations (MD=3,66), in the case of those of different sexual orientation, the respondents declare the same reluctance (MD=2,53).

If stereotypes and prejudices show us how we think, how we affectively report ourselves to other (closeness-rejection) and how we evaluate different groups, discrimination refers to our behaviour. Thus, discrimination can be seen as a behaviour of exclusion of reduction of access for certain individuals to certain resources. Discrimination manifests itself also when certain characteristics, such as race, gender, health etc. generate moral judgements about that individual (Botoşineanu, F., 2014, p. 17). The targets for hostility vary from one society to another, but most studies have centred themselves on race, gender and age as dimensions that are the foundations of prejudices and discrimination (Mackie, Hamilton, Susskind şi Rosselli, 1996).

According to the results obtained, the opinion of most students is that in school the following category are *treated worse:* people with disabilities, those of another religion as well as the Romani ethnicity. Almost a third of the respondents have declared themselves to partially agree, mentioning the three categories as being exposed to a discriminatory treatment. 1 in 3 students claim categorically that Romani students are treated worse in school. The discrimination of these categories is considered as being present also in public places in a larger percentage, in the opinion of high-school students.

According to our data, we can notice the exposure of family members to a discriminatory treatment (impolite addressing, exclusion, marginalization in school, unjust punishing) due to religion or ethnicity.

High frequencies are also observed as far as discriminating due to socio-economical situations or the disabilities of a family member are concerned. Thus, 36% of students declare that a family member has been insulted due to a disability or has been marginalized in school. 19% of students claim they had heard from his family of the exclusion from school of persons with disabilities. The results obtained confirmed recent studies which revealed an unfavourable perception on equity in school from the perspective of equal opportunities for students with learning difficulties (Bujorean,. E., 2017, p.240).

The socio-economical situation raises other barriers at the level of social interactions. 1 in 5 students declare that a family member has been unjustly sanctioned or has been insulted due to economic background. Previous studies show that high-school students perceive the Romanian

educational system as being inequitable as far as equal opportunities are concerned, regardless of economic family background (Bujorean, E., 2017, p.218). Teachers tend to have lower expectations as far as school performance is concerned when it comes to children coming from unprivileged families. However, when the teachers are capable of inspiring self-confidence and support for these categories so that they can overcome certain socio-cultural barriers, students will refocus their self-esteem and will make an effort in order to reach the educational potential they are capable of.

If previous results took the extended family into consideration, at the question of whether they had ever been discriminated against, 20% of students have answered in the affirmative, while 46% declare they have never been in such a situation. The larger percentage of students who refuse to answer (8%) or who claim they don't know (24%) shows that students are reluctant and lack sufficient knowledge to determine inequitable manifestations when it comes to social interactions. Even when students declare to have been victims of discrimination, few of them name the reason caused this different treatment. Most of them admit that their age and socio-economic status determined others to adopt a discriminatory and negative behaviour.

Conclusions

Our study shows the students' reluctance to co-exist with certain categories of vulnerable persons by stigmatizing and using social exclusion (homosexuals, Romani, people infected with HIV, immigrants). These aspects draw attention to the need to fight against ethnocentric, xenophobic or homophobic attitudes in school. At the same time, the study shows that the manifestation of intolerant attitudes coincides in many cases with the posture of victim of discriminatory manifestations.

Tolerance as an attitude and type of behaviour is learned from a very early age, is taken on due to examples within the family, community and school. We are not born with stereotypes and prejudices. We internalize them during our schooling in groups of belonging. If education is a long-lasting process, there is no school discipline that teaches tolerance, but the effects of any activities can shape our attitude towards the others. The absence of tolerance cannot be attributed only to previous generations of teachers, since its foundations can begin with an improvement of one's own behaviour (Șoitu, L., 2001, p.231).

If teachers are aware of the negative effects of stereotypes and prejudices, this is a way to facilitate harmonious relationships with students and parents. Contacts established between cultural groups at the school level favour certain types of bonds inside the school and between the family and the educational institution. Cultural relationships depend also equally on the children's social and socio-cognitive representations (Perregaux, C., 1999, p. 84). Students are receptive to what their teachers are and experience, and not only to what they say and teach. School and classroom organization should favour every student, regardless of the differences between them – they need the experience of being all accepted equally. Only by internalizing this kind of attitude will they be able to offer in turn tolerance, respect and recognition to those who are different or less appreciated. Psycho-pedagogical counselling plays a major part in satisfying basic needs of security and belonging for students that are culturally different. It is necessary that psycho-pedagogical counselling must have a multicultural perspective (Bodnariuc, P., 2006).

Counsellors must admit the fact that students and parents bring their entire cultural history (gender, social class, religion, language) to the counselling process. In shaping the programs of educational counselling in which students from vulnerable categories are involved, and important role must be given to their experiences and their fears. Many of them could experience feelings of inadequacy or even to be discredited due to certain setbacks in accumulating knowledge and skills. Establishing a climate of acceptance by acknowledging individual potential and different cultures is a way of instilling in students a sense of self-efficiency, determining thus a superior motivation.

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