

JUDGING CULTURES: INTERTWINED SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS**JUGER DES CULTURES:
CONCEPTS SOCIOLOGIQUES INTÉRIEURS****JUDECÂND CULTURILE: CONCEPTE SOCIOLOGICE ÎNRUDITE****Stăncuța Ramona DIMA-LAZA**Universitatea de Vest "Vasile Goldiș" din Arad
lazastancuta@yahoo.com**Abstract**

The paper presents a cultural analysis of social concepts as well as the way people in general perceive other cultures. One element taken into consideration is ethnocentrism, which refers to a personal belief that one's culture is superior to others. It represents a biased assumption that certain groups of individuals are morally and mentally inferior. On the other hand, there is xenocentrism, or the tendency to overrate other cultures in terms of values, traditions, beliefs. This may stem from stereotypes or from believing that there are universally valid ideas about certain nations: Swiss watches are the best, Belgian chocolate is the most delicious or the Japanese are the most skillful people when it comes to developing state-of-the-art technology. Therefore, the sense of in-group identity should be placed at the core of intercultural interaction playing a crucial role in the context of today's globalization.

Résumé

L'article présente une analyse culturelle des concepts sociaux ainsi que la manière dont les gens en général perçoivent d'autres cultures. Un élément pris en considération est l'ethnocentrisme, qui se réfère à une croyance personnelle selon laquelle la culture d'une personne est supérieure aux autres. Cela représente une hypothèse biaisée selon laquelle certains groupes d'individus sont moralement et mentalement inférieurs. D'autre part, il existe un xénocentrisme, ou la tendance à surévaluer d'autres cultures en termes de valeurs, de traditions, de croyances. Cela peut résulter de stéréotypes ou de croire qu'il existe des idées universellement valables sur certaines nations: les montres suisses sont les meilleures, le chocolat belge est le plus délicieux ou les japonais sont les gens les plus habiles en matière de développement de la haute technologie. Par conséquent, le sens de l'identité en groupe devrait être placé au cœur de l'interaction interculturelle jouant un rôle crucial dans le contexte de la mondialisation d'aujourd'hui.

Rezumat

Lucrarea prezintă o analiză din punct de vedere cultural a unor concepte sociale și a modului în care oamenii, în general, percep cultura. Un element luat în considerare este etnocentrismul, care se referă la convingerea personală că propriile caracteristici culturale sunt superioare celor aparținând altor națiuni. Este vorba despre o presupunere subiectivă conform căreia anumite grupuri de indivizi sunt considerate inferioare din punct de vedere moral și mental. Pe de altă parte, se analizează termenul cunoscut ca xenocentrism sau tendința de a supraestima valorile și tradițiile altor culturi. Stereotipurile ar putea reprezenta un punct de plecare pentru aceste considerații conform cărora ar exista idei universal valabile despre anumite națiuni: ceasurile elvețiene sunt cele mai performante, ciocolata belgiană este cea mai gustoasă, japonezii sunt adevarați experți când vine vorba de dezvoltarea unor tehnologii de ultimă oră. În consecință,

sentimentul de identitate a unui grup ar trebui să reprezinte epicentrul interacțiunii interculturale, jucând un rol crucial în contextul actual al globalizării.

Key words: *culture, communication, ethnocentrism, xenocentrism, stereotypes.*

Mots clé: *culture, communication, ethnocentrisme, xénocentrisme, stéréotypes.*

Cuvinte cheie: *cultură, comunicare, etnocentrism, xenocentrism, stereotipuri.*

Culture is a very complex concept made up of traditional patterns and derivatives of experience, a set of values and beliefs or ways of dealing with social situations that are communicated from one generation to another. The orientations to life or behavioural conventions shared by a group of people represent the core of cultural values from an anthropological point of view. Culture can affect people's behavior as it is acquired through interpersonal interactions, but this does not mean that they also share the same cultural background. According to scientists, there are two different perspectives to be taken into account: the culture-specific dimension (which is studied inside the system of one nation) and the culture general one (which is studied outside the system, in several countries or nations). And they must both be taken into consideration when analyzing either anthropologic or linguistic or international management issues. Several studies have been carried out for comparing cultures at country level but also at individual level. Psychologist Shalom Schwartz has identified ten different individual value dimensions and seven different values at group level. The ones belonging to the first category are: power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, universalism, self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement and they all represent attributes people may be sensitive to, during intercultural interaction.

Another well-known anthropologist, Edward T. Hall has focused his work and studies on cultural differences from different perspectives. First, he considers that during intercultural interaction emphasis may be either on promptness or on the involvement with people. Secondly, there are two types of communication patterns to be considered: one that uses clearly stated verbal messages and one based on non-verbal behavior to convey meaning. The third dimension he mentions is the use of personal space. People with different cultural backgrounds should approach a correct attitude, depending on the kind of personal contact established with the interlocutor: there is a well-defined distance for lovemaking, casual conversations, business or public performances. Other researchers "investigated North American and Arab students' use of space. They found that the Arab students not only stood closer to one another than did the North Americans but that they also talked more loudly, touched each other more often, maintained a higher degree of eye contact and faced each other more directly." [Spencer-Oatey, Franklin 2009:24]. Many linguists have agreed with and even used in their studies the opinions formulated by Hall in what concerns cultural differences. But, on the other hand, anthropologists like Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck focused on other problematic issues that belong to the same field of research. They claim that the same importance should be given to the individual's relationship with the environment he is living in, to the way people interact, to the activities they are carrying out and most of all, to human nature. Cultural orientation is very important in the business environment for example, as it can seriously affect, in a positive or negative manner, the workplace performance.

A famous survey conducted in the field is known as the GLOBE. It involved 62 different nationalities and its aim was to emphasize and to set forth relationships in the international business environment with respect to the connections that exist among leadership, social effectiveness and culture. The dimensions identified by House J. refer, first of all, to the equal distribution of power in a society and to the extent to which humans are rewarded for being fair and honest. Secondly, he underlines the fact that some individuals tend to avoid uncertainty, so they choose to rely on rules

and regulations that are characteristic for that particular society. Other dimensions relate to some organizations' aims of promoting collectivism, assertiveness, equality between men and women. The people involved in this study wanted both to stress the way things are in a community but also the way they should be. The two basic aspects to be considered when studying or teaching linguistics and culture are the principles that are typical for language use and the linguistic styles, as they are both perceived differently across different cultural groups. But the first step in getting to know one's culture and linguistic 'habits' is by actually spending some time in one's environment. Anthropologists must never rely on their own cultural beliefs because they might fail to observe the group's assumptions. Considering this context it is necessary to explain the term known as ethnocentrism. Some people tend to believe that their own culture is better than all the others. And this is not a completely wrong assumption, because if it were so, individuals would not be able to achieve social cohesion and to establish interpersonal relations. The important thing is how far ethnocentrism goes, because at a certain point, it may cause frustration or even racism.

Along the years, this widely debated term has been at the core of many conflicts and wars: it is believed by some scientists that the Iraq war, the Nazi death camps or the death of so many Native Americans (who were killed by the Euro-Americans in order to take their land) were all about ethnocentrism. They explain that when people come to consider themselves superior, their negative behavior towards the so-called 'inferior' culture is totally justified. Therefore, anthropologists came up with the idea of cultural relativism. This means that when studying a group of people from a cultural point of view they must be perceived as part of a whole, so, this 'whole' should be identified and accurately analyzed. One culture may have logic for some but be a complete nonsense for others. Human rights for example have been very often debated. One can understand a different culture without approving of it and without forcing one's own views and ideas on another group. If for some people the traditions of one country seem to strongly violate human rights, for others they may be regarded as something absolutely normal and part of their everyday lives. And imposing new values on them would mean destroying their personality and national identity. Therefore, the purpose of cultural relativism is to avoid ethnocentrism, to avoid comparing one nation to another but without going to extremes, without claiming that there are no moral rules and regulations as this could lead to anarchy and chaos. Anthropologists have drawn the conclusion that their job is to help people understand the difference between culture in general and other cultures in particular. They also claim that ethnocentrism has more negative characteristics than positive ones, that any kind of ethnic group has the right of self-determination and self-enhancement. "Most studies of self-enhancement have been conducted in the United States, Europe and Australia, leaving open the question of whether people in other cultures, particularly in East Asia, also self-enhance [...]. On one side of the debate, researchers have suggested that people in certain cultures, such as Japan, do not show the same self-enhancing tendencies as people in the United States [...]. Other researchers have argued that all people [...] behave in self-enhancing ways that promote self-esteem. However, because different characteristics are valued in different cultures, people promote their self-esteem in culturally different ways. [...]. In support of this hypothesis, Sedikides Gaertner and Toguchi (2003) found that both American and Japanese participants self-enhanced but used different tactics to do so." [Leary, M.R., 2007:317].

In this culture-comparative research several aspects of speech and communicative events have been analyzed and researchers focused on direct-indirect communication, on orientation (whether it is towards oneself or towards others); however, no universal frameworks have been established when comparing different cultural groups.

In order to better understand the characteristics of one particular culture, anthropologists have interviewed several people who have moved to a new country. They were asked to speak about culture shock experiences, about strange reactions of their new interlocutors, about the relationships that have established in the new environment. Based on such data, they elaborated some sort of stereotypes or behavior traits that proved to be characteristic for a specific ethnic group. But such features cannot be regarded as set rules or standards because they are widely

subjective and depend on personal experiences of the subjects interviewed. Therefore, not only ethnocentrism and xenocentrism represent concepts of cultural sociology but also culture shock, cultural relativism and cultural diversity. When discussing the latter term one should focus on the relationship between the members of a nation, on their life principles, linguistic and non-linguistic rituals, artefacts and even laws. Behavioural patterns differ very much from one part of the country to another. While the Arab societies, for example, do not eat pork, the Hindus people avoid beef. If the Westerners consider it absolutely normal to kiss in public, for others this might represent an offense. But, on the other hand there is universality of culture. Beyond cultural differences, there are common denominators. Irrespective of their social background, people have certain necessities that are universal, such as: food habits, sexual taboos, marriage and funeral rituals, language or everyday practices like cooking or dancing. Therefore, when it comes to intercultural communication, regularity and variability are closely connected. As Burr observed, “the way in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific [...]. If our knowledge of the world, our common ways of understanding it, is not derived from the nature of the world as it really is, where does it come from? The social constructionist answer is that people construct it between them. It is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated.” [Burr, V., 1996:73]. As Spencer and Franklin point out, some social groups share common elements like the ones mentioned above, but members of the same group may hold completely different beliefs about life. They also give an example: if the members of a group have fun together and laugh at jokes it does not mean that individuals belonging to different groups will find the same jokes amusing. Although the behavioural contexts differ, people tend to apply the same principles everywhere: a company manager for example, will try to ‘play the same part’ in the family. Some researchers support the idea that culture should be analyzed only according to specific contexts, that it is, generally speaking, situational. Inside a social group, variation may occur. When discussing cultural norms, anthropologists do not actually refer to uniformity, but to attitudinal means that entail variability. As Zegarac emphasizes, “just as there is no epidemic without individual organisms being infected by particular viruses or bacteria, there is no culture without representations being distributed in the brains/minds of individuals. [...] There is no epidemic without diseased individuals, but the study of epidemics cannot be reduced to the study of individual pathology. From this perspective, the boundaries of a given culture are not any sharper than those of a given epidemic. An epidemic involves a population with many individuals being afflicted to varying degrees by a particular strain of micro-organisms over a continuous time span on a territory with fuzzy and unstable boundaries. And a culture involves a social group (such as a nation, ethnic group, profession, generation etc) defined in terms of similar cultural representations held by a significant proportion of the group’s members. In other words, people are said to belong in the same culture to the extent that the set of their shared cultural representations is large.” [Žegarac, V., 2007:31]. According to scientists, not all people live in the center of the community, either because they do not want to or due to the fact that they are novices in that community. This idea underlines another aspect of culture, respectively the variability that takes place over time. When individuals form a new social group, they will develop particular practices along the years, forming thus, their own culture. In time, by means of innovation, the cultural manifestations of the group can change, idea that, once again, comes to point out the element of variability. The goals of the individuals may change and therefore, they are free to drop some cultural practices.

Most often cultural groups have been identified with ethnic groups. Linguists observed that these groups had been organized according to race, language, religion, geographical position, social class, political views, occupation. Therefore, no nation can be described in terms of one single cultural descriptor. The United States for example, have been referred to as ‘a giant melting pot’ exactly because of the high number of inhabitants with completely different cultural backgrounds that render the country a complex cultural mapping. However, as long as such individuals share some patterns of regularity, we may say that they belong to a certain cultural group. In this respect

we can exemplify not only with organizational groups but also with religious ones. Rituals, behaviours or procedures can shape the culture of a religious group and this point of view must be taken into consideration because religion is an important part of everyone's life; it is an element that defines both mental and physical well-being. Furthermore, there are organizational groups. These occur when two giant companies with a different cultural background, merge. Spencer and Franklin mentioned the clash of culture that emerged when Daimler-Benz and Chrysler merged. Having different roots, the employees experienced cultural conflicts caused by new procedures and values imposed on them. Culture shock does not occur only when living in another country for a longer period of time; individuals may also have this unpleasant and stressful feeling when changing their job or when going to work in a multinational company. There are also professional groups that are joined by people with the same field of activity. In education for example, due to the need to use e-learning materials, professors and IT experts must work together. Multi-professional teams are challenging, but still, not enough developed as to broadly discuss about a culture of inter-professional working.

To conclude, culture is manifested in different interconnected ways, with a special emphasis on regularity and variability. As mentioned above, social groups vary in terms of complexity, size, background. The dangers linguists and anthropologists may come across when researching in this field are over-generalization, inappropriate stereotyping and excessive reductionism. One must keep in mind that if one person shows respect or politeness towards a foreigner it does not mean that all the people in that respective country are polite and respectful. Stereotyping usually occurs when referring to groups that have the same occupation, skin colour or religion. But such characteristics must not be attributed to a group as a whole (for example, not all Afro-Americans are good basketball players) because it may lead to discrimination and other cultural prejudices. When discussing about reductionism, individuals assume that the respective cultural group has some essential properties that shape their identity. Several key aspects of culture have been described in this paper such as the way in which culture is manifested in different societies or the importance of representing social groups. Culture in general has a huge impact on interpersonal communication and the research in this field may be endless and challenging.

References:

- Burr, V., *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 73;
Leary, M. R., *Motivational and Emotional Aspects of the Self. Annual Review of Psychology*, 58, Westview Press, 2007, p. 317;
Omohundro, John, *Thinking Like an Anthropologist*, Boston, McGraw Hill, 2008, p. 45.
Spencer-Oatey, Helen, Franklin, Peter, *Intercultural Interaction. A Multidisciplinary Approach to Intercultural Communication*, Palgrave MacMillan, London, England, 2009, p. 24;
Žegarac, V., *A cognitive pragmatic perspective on communication and culture. In Kotthoff and H. Spencer-Oatey (eds), Handbook of Intercultural Communication*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, 2007, p. 31-53.

