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The Cultural Structure of Society and the Role of Communication in Forming Cultural Identity – Relevant Aspects for Social Work

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Abstract: *Culture is one of the basic components of society, which objectively reflects the state of a people, a nation or a group of people, its level of emancipation and development, both macrosocially and microsocially. Over time, society has been built on the cultural proficiency of individuals, groups and peoples, transposed into their history through artistic and cultural creations in literature, music, sculpture, architecture, religion, science, philosophy, sociology and politology. The components, characteristics and elements that comprise the culture of a community shape its cultural identity, thus building its social identity. National identity is built by cumulation of the elements composing the social identity of all the communities occupying a certain geographical space. When members of a community come into contact with social groups that adhere to different cultural elements, intercultural adaptation begins. The process is marked by the mutual communication of cultural particularities and the negotiation of the values related to these particularities, and through this communicative process the individuals undergo a certain degree of intercultural transformation, corresponding to the degree of communication they had. The purpose of this article is to theoretically analyze the relevant connections, for the field of social work, between the cultural structure of society and communication within the process of cultural identity formation.*

Keywords: *intercultural communication; social communication; cultural identity; cultural structure.*

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Introduction

In order to understand and accept the cultural differences and similarities between different communities, it is necessary to comprehend the concept of "culture", a notion that has generated numerous descriptive, historical, normative, psychological, generic or structural definitions. Zamfir and Vlăscanu (1988, 147) show that, initially, the term "culture" was used to mark the transition of human communities from shepherding to the "culture" of the land, i.e. its cultivation. Later, in the modern era, the term underwent an interpretive drift (Bandler & Grinder, 1982), referring to the patterns of thought, attitude and action characteristic of a population, which include two components: a material one (tools, housing, clothing, means of transport) and an immaterial one (beliefs, norms, values, patterns of action, symbols).

Jenks (2007) distinguishes four main meanings of the term "culture". The first sense refers to culture in an elitist manner, as a mental state or intellectual condition. The person who aspires to perfection, in order to grow as a person, becomes cultured. Culture is seen as a quality of individuals capable of learning, accumulating knowledge and acquiring those qualities that are considered desirable for a cultured man. The second meaning is centered on society, not the individual, culture being closely related to civilization. According to this definition, there is a stratification of society, and the emphasis is placed on the degree of civilization of the individuals who form that community, hence it follows that some societies are more cultured and civilized than others. The third meaning also refers to an elitist culture, only this time elitism is expressed through arts and the intellectual products of a society. The fourth meaning defines culture as everything related to the lifestyle in a society.

Society is defined (Zamfir & Vlăscanu, 1998, 548) as an organized way of existence adopted by groups of people who occupy the same territory and participate in a common culture. Society and culture are two terms that are in an interdependent relationship. Culture is at the same time the product of the members of society and one of its components, i.e. the sum of their way of thinking, behavior, traditions and customs. The social, economic, political, moral and religious behavior of the individual in society is largely dominated by the culture of the group to which one belongs. Culture is also closely interdependent with communication, because it involves the use of symbols, by which individuals understand the meanings of what is communicated to them and modify their behaviors accordingly. Pratt (2021)

argues that this symbol-based modification of behaviors enables the establishment of societies.

Cultural identity refers to the individual's belonging to a certain group and their appropriation of the elements related to the nationality, ethnicity, race, religion of the respective group, as a vector that differentiates oneself from the others. Cultural identity is built and maintained through a process of communicating collective knowledge, such as traditions, heritage, language, norms, customs. When these elements and characteristics are extended to a whole nation, national identity is formed. Therefore, there is a cultural identity both microsocially (of groups of individuals or communities) and macrosocially (of an entire nation), but national identity is a macrosocial element par excellence.

The *purpose* of this article is to theoretically analyze the relevant connections, for the field of social work, between the cultural structure of society and communication within the process of cultural identity formation.

The *objectives* of this study are: 1. the analysis of the components and characteristics of culture, as a factor that modulates human communication; 2. identifying the social challenges raised by subcultures and countercultures in the practice of social work and how they can be overcome through communication; 3. the analysis of cultural relativism and its effects on cultural identity, because of the relativism in values generated by technological development and the cultural innovation imposed by this development.

In order to achieve the previously listed objectives, we started from a series of *research questions*: a. what comprises cultural identity and how are its components reflected in social communication? b. what is the impact of subcultures and countercultures on social cohesion? c. what are the specific communication and intervention needs of subcultures and countercultures which may be relevant for social work? d. what are the positive as well as negative effects of cultural relativism and how can communication mitigate its negative effects?

The components and characteristics of culture

In order to be able to understand the process of cultural identity formation through cultural communication, it is necessary to initially explore the components that make up the concept of "culture": the cognitive component, the normative component and the symbolic component (Chiribucă, 2013, 20-21).

The *cognitive component* is made up of three elements: popular knowledge (a set of explanations and interpretations of a wide variety of events shared by the members of a group), scientific knowledge (a set of observations, theses, ideas and theories about nature, society and humanity, which are objective, credible and verifiable) and beliefs (ideas marked by subjectivity and which cannot be scientifically verified) (Menary & Gillett, 2016). The *symbolic component* is a system of elements on the meanings of which social agreement has been reached. The element that makes the existence of this system of meanings possible is language, which includes speech, writing, numbers, symbols and gestures or other forms of non-verbal communication (Chiribucă, 2013).

The *normative component* includes a set of norms regarding how people should act, norms that are learned in the socialization process and that represent ways of action and behavior seen as desirable under certain specific conditions by the members of a community. These elements are: social norms (dressing, greeting, addressing in public and other routine aspects of daily life), morals (ideas about justice and injustice, good and bad), taboos (prohibitions arising as a result of the intense support some moral ideas arise within a society), traditions and customs (regular behaviors, practiced for a very long time by a group and which are transmitted from generation to generation), laws (standardized rules of behavior, adopted by state institutions) and values (abstract ideas, with a high degree of generalization and acceptance, regarding what is good, adequate, righteous) (Painter, 2020).

For a better understanding of the importance of communication in the process of cultural identity, it is necessary to analyze the characteristics of culture. First of all, culture is *acquired* by the individual throughout their life through education (formal and informal learning from other members of society). Culture offers the individual a series of norms, rules, values, which prepare them for integration into society (Chiu et al., 2009). Culture is *social* in nature because it is a product of groups and not of individuals, and it helps the individual integrate into the group because it provides a more complex perspective on reality, by helping the individual relate their attitudes and behaviors not only to their own set of values, but also to the group and society, diminishing egocentrism. Culture creates, maintains and develops human relationships between individuals who belong to the same group, shaping the personality of the individual and, at the same time, providing the social boundaries to which they can relate (Faulkner et al., 2005).

Culture is a *common value*, it does not belong to a single person or only certain individuals, but is shared by the vast majority of members of the

same community. Culture is *intergenerationally transmitted*, through language and other means of communication. This is an ongoing process, which can be spontaneous (from parents to children) or organized (through schooling). In both cases, members of a community accumulate and pass on information that they consider defining for their social group (Fortman & Giles, 2005). Culture is *cumulative*, always in continuous development, that is, it is a process carried out over time. Beliefs, customs, norms and values accumulate throughout the history of a society, and from this point of view, culture can be considered a *social heritage* (Chiu et al., 2009).

Culture is *adaptive*, because, through the totality of traditions, customs and values of a community, it offers the individual the possibility to appropriately interpret and solve the situations that arise in the community, adapting to the society he is part of. Culture is *dynamic*, constantly changing, adapting and evolving. Culture is *variable*, because it differs from society to society (Faulkner et al., 2005). Even within the same society, culture can vary in different historical periods or in certain subgroups, meaning that a series of clarifications are required regarding the position of subcultures and countercultures specific to some minority groups compared to the majority culture.

Subcultures and countercultures

Culture is defined not only by the elements that comprise it and its characteristics, but also by the traits that emerge from the cultural complexes of some social subgroups. When this diversity is manifested within a social macrogroup, subcultures and even countercultures emerge.

A subculture is specific to a small group of individuals that operate within the dominant culture. A counterculture is specific to a group of people who share values that oppose one or more significant values in the dominant culture. Subcultures have distinct values from the majority but share the interests of the majority group in a way that does not violate or contradict what the values of the majority promote (De Burgh-Woodman & Brace0Govan, 2008). Subcultures reflect a set of specific traits, which are based on criteria of nationality, religiosity, profession, age, etc. Countercultures, on the other hand, are often viewed as deviant because the values and behaviors of their members oppose the norms dictated by the mainstream cultural values (Schnell, 1982). Sometimes countercultures are large-scale movements that cause social change (for example, the hippie movement in the US in the 1960s, which was a protest against the Western

materialistic society, or the extremist organization Ku Klux Klan, in the mid-19th century , which supported the superiority of the white race).

Once they become integrated into a culture, its members come to consider it natural, and there is such a strong psychological adhesion to that culture, that they can no longer conceive of the existence of another way of life. This does not automatically exclude openness to cultural contamination with other cultures, nor does it necessarily imply their rejection, but when individuals place value only on the norms of their own culture and any external influence is considered negative, ethnocentrism appears, which involves giving a disproportionate value to one's own culture compared to that of others, and one's own cultural models are used to make negative judgments about other cultures.

The explanation lies in the way the development of individuals takes place within their culture of origin. Inevitably, the cultural elements specific to the social group of the individual infuse their personality, influencing their choices and reasoning (Lee & Hwang, 2024). Extremist ethnocentric views can generate ethnic cleansing, xenophobic or racist movements, according to which the dominant cultural group negatively highlights the cultural traits of other social groups, thus justifying ethnic cleansing. On the other hand, when the principles of non-discrimination and universality are respected, ethnocentrism can also have positive consequences, acting as a defense mechanism to preserve one's own culture and identity.

The opposite of ethnocentrism is xenocentrism, which consists in underestimating local cultural values and overestimating foreign cultural values (Cucato et al., 2023). Xenocentrism is based on the prejudice that everything foreign is automatically desirable, in which case there is a voluntary disavowal of the cultural values of the community to which the individual belongs. The positive side of xenocentrism, as a way of relating to a culture, is that it makes the evolution of societies possible, an evolution determined, in essence, by the ability to take into account what can is generally valuable, useful, important for a better quality of life from a foreign culture.

Social work, subcultures, countercultures and communication

Countries with a stable economy and with a political system based on the rule of law promote cultural integration, compared to authoritarian or anti-democratic state systems, where the official state policy is cultural uniformity and assimilation of cultural minorities in a form that ensures their dissolution in the majority culture (Frunzaru, 2013). The negative

implications of cultural uniformity are related to lack of social dynamism and a community's ability to accept social change. Societies that reject multicultural integration have a pronounced tendency towards conservatism, which in terms of social policies translates into a one-sided type of intervention models for vulnerable populations (Miftode, 2010). In other words, in the case of social work, the particular cultural traits of the beneficiaries are not taken into account neither legally, nor in the process of educating social workers or other specialists in the assistential services, nor when developing the case-by-case intervention plan.

Culturally opaque societies have problems integrating people who do not conform to general cultural norms, an aspect that creates tensions within society, which the excessively traditionalist state is forced to control through repressive methods (Mihăilescu, 2003). Cultural opacity manifests itself also in terms of public communication regarding the elements of diversity that characterize minority groups. The lack of communication or an incomplete or reserved speech of social influencers are likely to create social taboos or social prejudices (Habermas, 1985), which can, in turn, generate social intolerance and, starting from this, social conflicts.

A fundamental principle in the activity of the social worker when the beneficiary is adherent to a subculture is tolerance (Buzducea, 2009). By promoting tolerance towards the values of the majority group, the social worker can help the beneficiary find the bridges between their own values and the majority culture, and starting from this, the social worker can provide them with effective communication mechanisms in order to draw the attention of the authorities to their specific needs. Naturally, this is possible in societies where the structure of state institutions is built in such a way as to recognize and respect the exercise of rights by cultural minorities. Otherwise, being in a state of cultural minority can transform that social group into a disadvantaged or vulnerable group (Miftode, 2010), and public policies that would ignore the cultural specificity of this group could be qualified as a form of structural violence (Sinha et al., 2017).

Another important principle in the activity of the social worker when working with members of subcultures is the principle of cultural integration (Buzducea, 2009). Integration is a goal that cannot be achieved in the absence of communication (Habermas, 1985). Communication facilitates social awareness regarding the existence of the minority group, the elements that differentiate the majority group from the minority group, but also the common elements between the two groups, while also recognizing the specific needs of the minority group, which arise precisely as an effect of its cultural particularities, therefore strengthening the legitimacy of the minority

group's requests and the consequences that could occur if elements of cultural differentiation are ignored. Awareness of the common aspects between minority and majority groups, as well as the legitimacy of minority groups' demands favors the creation of a climate of social acceptability, which in turn favors social harmony (Huidu & Sandu, 2020).

Communication ensures the understanding of differences and alleviates social asperities generated by fears, prejudices, lack of culture, therefore communication is a guarantor of non-discrimination (Lee & Hwang, 2024). A society that does not discriminate on the basis of cultural differences is a society that does not feel its cultural identity threatened, does not feel its status quo attacked by the demands of minority groups and manages to achieve a fair distribution of the state's resources, in order to ensure balanced needs to all members of society (Cucato et al., 2023). When the members of some subcultures feel that their position is not heard, that they do not have the opportunity to communicate the arguments that support it, and that any ways of publicizing the messages that are representative for their community are blocked, a subculture can turn into a counterculture, cultural integration transforms into an active fight against the values of the majority group, and if the pressure exerted by the blocking of communication channels continues, countercultures can even resort to violent social reactions.

Cultural relativism

The adaptive character of culture brings the concept of cultural relativism to the forefront, according to which values are ethically relative for any culture (Huidu & Sandu, 2020). The criterion of relativity does not mean the relativity of any criterion. Cultural relativism offers the possibility of understanding the position of other people by suspending one's own judgments and analyzing the features of a culture from the perspective of the people living in that culture. Cultural relativism offers the possibility of openness to social innovation without making value judgments. Critics of cultural relativism (Bondrea, 2006) dismantle extremist practices, considering them a non-value that must be denounced, while practices that violate human rights should be fought. Social change is a process and, like any process, it is subject to the action of time, just as culture is subject to historical context, the triggering factors of change being innovation (new cultural elements are created from pre-existing elements), discoveries and scientific research (acquiring or improving knowledge about existing

elements in the environment) and sharing (mutual transmission of information, especially through communication technology) (Huidu, 2022).

Culture defines the way in which the individual relates to himself and others, provides an identity to the person, modulates their character and personality traits, unites individuals and gives them a sense of security (by adhering to similar cultural values, people become predictable for those with whom they interact), and the values shared in the community provide a sense of belonging. Society is in a continuous cultural transformation, because the individuals who make it up are in a permanent development. The social institutions on which society is based are, by and large, the same, instead the way in which individuals relate to them differs according to the adopted cultural position, which in turn differs according to the socio-cultural and historical context.

Technology is currently the catalyst with the most important role in influencing contemporary cultural life. Technology has considerably increased the quality of life, either through the comfort it brings, or by completely taking over some tasks that, before the technological era, were the exclusive assignments of humans. The power of technology has fundamentally shaped the cultural structure and mentality of today's society. Nowadays, it can even be said that humanity feels a pressure in its daily existence, exerted by technology, and there are also people who decide to impose limits on their use of technology, refusing to yield to technology what they feel is part of the control over their own existence. With the massive introduction of distance communication technology, interpersonal relationships have undergone major changes. Communication through physical contact was gradually reduced, until impersonal communication through distance communication technologies has become equally used, even preferred in many situations, for convenience or to reduce travel costs. Naturally, this phenomenon has a major impact on the present society, and the cultural transformation brought about by communication technology is supplemented by the process of globalization.

The mass media and online media, through which the individual obtains information about daily activity, play a defining role in the development of society. A much larger amount of information is currently transmitted with the help of technology (TV, Internet, tablets, smart phones) and less through classical means (printed media, books). The amount of information received is enormous, and the power of selection and decision is hampered by the accuracy of the information, especially since sometimes the individual cannot choose whether they want to receive the information or not, or if it is an appropriate time to be given that information, as many

times the person is not in the right context that would allow them to verify the accuracy of that information. This is the case of billboards on buildings, advertising screens mounted in public squares, radio stations playing in public transport, etc.

In order to be able to achieve a balance between technology, the information received and the events within the society, the individual must have a constant reference to a set of values, which the culture provides him. Even people with a high level of education report a phenomenon of loss of values (generated by cultural loss), due to the deconstruction of traditional concepts and their fragmented reconstruction, against the background of the emergence of new technologies (Huidu, 2022).

Conclusions

Humanity is at a cultural crossroads, against the backdrop of globalization, which will involve both a redefinition of individual identity and a redefinition of the person's position in relation to technology. The external composition of the vital environment of humanity changes under the impact of technology, the sphere of interests widens, as well as the horizon of expectations, new opportunities, new targets, not always in accordance with the traditional universal culture.

The means of communication, of living, of work change, and humanity culturally adapts according to them, some values dissolve, a series of new values appear, the hierarchy of enduring values changes, and human communities develop along two axes. Firstly, by perpetuating those elements of culture that give a sense of stability and continuity, and secondly by cultivating innovative sets of values and reconceptualizing the socio-cultural framework of human activities and interactions.

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