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Psychological Aspects Regarding Intercultural Transformation Through Communication – Elements of Interest in the Practice of Social Work

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Abstract: *When a foreign group that wants to relocate comes into contact with the culture of the host group, the process of intercultural adaptation of both groups is set in motion. The process starts and continues through communication, regardless of its form. During this process, individuals undergo a certain degree of intercultural transformation, corresponding to the degree of communication they have had. Transformation is bilateral and occurs naturally and inevitably, even when foreigners do not seek to adapt and want to maintain their individuality, even if they do not have a proactive attitude in order for adaptation to occur, even when there is no desire to effectively participate in communicative activities with the hosts and the foreigners choose to mainly become implicated in superficial contacts with the natives. Even in extreme conflictual situations, such as war or the crisis of refugees, the individuals who came into contact with the culture of the states where they took refuge, upon returning to their own country, no longer have the same cultural traits as when they left their native country. The purpose of this article is to theoretically analyze the psychological mechanisms that are of interest in the field of social work regarding the process of intercultural transformation that takes place through communication between the host group and the foreign group in the clash of two different cultures.*

Keywords: *intercultural transformation, culture, minority group, intercultural communication, intercultural identity.*

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Introduction

Culture is everything that a community has produced historically, during its existence, including art, traditions, customs, religion, literature, lifestyle, political orientation, social morals, economic structure, language, legal norms, scientific knowledge (Chiribucă, 2013) etc. Some authors (Zamfir & Vlăscanu, 1998) link culture to what a society produces while occupying a delimited common territory, but other authors (Wilson & Donnan, 2005) show that a community can be linked to similar cultural traits even if it does not occupy the same territory and even if its members leave the territory where that culture originated (an edifying example in this sense is that of the Jewish people).

Population migration from certain areas can be caused by economic, social, political or environmental factors (De Haas, 2010). People migrate voluntarily when they are attracted by the economic prosperity, the political security and the social stability of the country where they want to move (Rudolf, 1994). Individuals migrate involuntarily when natural disasters or military movements occur in their native country and they want to move to a more secure country (Schmeidl, 1997).

Migrants are more or less predisposed to accept the culture of the host country, depending on how they left their countries voluntarily or involuntarily (De Haas, 2010). If they want to move to a country where they perceive that life is better, they tend to accept the culture of that country because they think that that way of thinking and actings is the key to obtain a higher quality of life (Rudolf, 1994). When people are forced to another country, they remain faithful to their native culture, they are opaque to adopting the culture of the hosts, they adopt parts of that culture for as much as it is necessary in order to integrate into the host society and they strive to keep their cultural heritage intact (Schmeidl, 1997).

After the first stage, when the clash between cultures takes place, the process of intercultural adaptation begins. During this process, members of both groups undergo a certain degree of intercultural transformation, which is bilateral and occurs naturally and inevitably. The changes brought about by the process of adaptation occur gradually, almost imperceptibly, with each stage when the change appears as something necessary, in order to be able to move to the next stage of coexistence. Intercultural adaptation can therefore be seen as a continuous process in which individuals go through different degrees of transformation. The changes that occur are a sum of the activity of all communication factors that influence social change within that community, regardless of whether the members of that community are

aware of those factors or not. Although the personal motivation of each foreigner will significantly influence the extent of the adaptation process, it is inevitable that changes will occur anyway.

Within this process, the phenomena of deculturalization and aculturalization take place. Deculturalization involves the gradual deconstruction of the cultural elements of the migrant group, which begins to use the language of the host group, in order to be able to effectively communicate its needs and demands, as well as during the common interaction of everyday life (Spring, 2012). Sometimes, the language of the host state ends up being used even among the members of the migrant group, an aspect that implies the transition to acculturation (Rudmin, 2003). Also, deculturalization involves the adoption of the traditions and customs of the host group, a phenomenon that takes place especially due to the interaction of the young generation with the members of the host society, in the process of formal education in schools. In the first formative years of a person, in the stage of early socialization (Berger & Luckman, 1966), children take the moral values that are transmitted to them through education as such, without critically analyzing them, due to diminished discernment and lack of ethical maturity. Teachers, due to the moral ascendancy they have culturally, are ethical models that children are encouraged to follow. For this reason, when cultural values are transmitted in educational institutions, they are strongly internalized by the younger generation. The cultural values of the host state are transmitted to the children of migrants in the schools of the host state, and the younger generation is much more likely to adopt them as such, compared to adult migrants (Spring, 2012).

The transition to acculturation also occurs in this case, when children raised in the host society ask adults who were educated in their country of origin to observe certain festive days and customs of the host state. Over time, the culture of the migrant group is replaced by the culture of the host group. Acculturation occurs when the person fully adopts the cultural elements of the host society, respecting native culture only as an element of family history or occasional behavior, with an eminently nostalgic character and not as a defining feature for the individual identity of the migrants (Rudmin, 2003). Gradually, through the processes of acculturation and deculturalization, the culture of the migrant group is assimilated by the culture of the host state, losing its individuality, while the culture of the host state maintains its cohesion, but is enriched with new elements

The *purpose* of this article is to theoretically analyze the psychological mechanisms that are of interest in the field of social work regarding the process of intercultural transformation that takes place through

communication between the host group and the foreign group in the clash of two different cultures. The *objectives* of this study are: a) to delimit what are the basic characteristics of a successful intercultural transformation from the point of view of social communication; b) to identify the premises that favor intercultural integration from a psychological and social work perspective.

In order to achieve the proposed objective, we started from a series of *research questions*: 1. is there any connection between a person's cultural adaptation capacity and their mental state? 2. what is the optimal mental attitude of the person towards the host environment in order to overcome cultural shock, in the process of intercultural transformation? 3. how can the balance be achieved between the native cultural identity and the intercultural identity acquired by the individual through communication processes with the members of the host group? 4. what is the role of the social worker in the cultural integration of people belonging to foreign minority groups?

Mental health and intercultural transformation through communication – aspects of interest for social work

The process of intercultural transformations is based on the dynamics of adaptation to stress, which involves a series of difficulties and stages characterized by a lack of temporary integration, and in some cases even a failure of integration (temporary or even permanent, if the person cannot psychologically adaptat to the socio-cultural norms of the host community). When these steps are successful, the individual's old cultural personality is transformed into a new personality, with a higher level of integration. Major and sudden changes are inherent in the initial phase of adaptation, when foreigners are least prepared to face the cultural challenges of the host society (Chen & Starosta, 1998). Major changes are themselves signs of difficulties in adaptation, followed by subsequent fluctuations in cultural stress, as demonstrated by extensive studies (Ward et al., 2001) in the field of culture shocks.

Culture shock is a state of cultural disorientation and value loss of the individual when the cultural elements that shape their personal identity come into conflict with those of the host society, in which the individual tries to integrate (Dutton, 2012). The person may stop the process by leaving the culturally alien environment, only to resume the same process when returning to their own community, where they will face the challenges of readjustment. The gradual and unconscious process of intercultural transformation is the main effect, as well as the main factor of the development of communication skills of foreigners and their participation in social communication activities with the hosts (Nakane, 2007). At the same time, an active and prolonged

involvement of the foreigner in communicative ethno-social processes will most likely lead to long-term intercultural transformations.

Foreigners in an unfamiliar environment tend to initially behave instinctively in social contexts, as a way to compensate for culture shock in their own behavior and to react appropriately to the behavior of those around them. Mental health is the basis of this effort, being reflected in what is the intimate ability of each foreigner to meet the challenges faced within the foreign environment. Remaining mentally healthy during this process is synonymous with what can be called an "adapted" person and assumes that the person in question can carry out everyday activities normally and feeling comfortable in a certain environment. This is the main goal considered by environments such as the family or the school, when carrying out different socialization activities for children. In the case of foreigners who settled in a different cultural environment, their ability to adapt is proportional to the communication capacity of the host environment and participation in the social life of the host group. Moreover, everything depends on the ability of the individual to respond in a way that optimally satisfies the requirements of the environment.

An improvement in the natural deviations of the mental state of the foreigner, brought on by the clash between cultures, is reflected in the congruence of the subjective understanding of the social system of the hosts. Integrated individuals have a broader, clear, objective and differentiated perspective on the cultural and communication patterns of the hosts. Accompanying this process, there is an increased willingness to participate in the emotional and social experiences of the natives and to use a multitude of resources to synchronize with the environment, by modifying their behavior according to the specific situations they face, in order to manage them efficiently and creatively. One of the criteria by which we can appreciate a successful communication is the realization of an overlap between the patterns of communication and the component parts of the communication (integration, synchronous) on the part of both groups, so that none of them avoids getting involved. Thus, the exchange of messages becomes efficient, clear and well timed.

One method of achieving congruent communication with natives is to observe how they interact with other foreigners, identifying the elements that make such communication functional and extracting the methods by which both involved parties test each other's capacity for perception. Specialized studies examine the lack of integration capacity in the process called "social alienation", which is not synonymous with "social isolation" nor with "social withdrawal". Social alienation (Bousquet, 2023) is a feeling

that involves foreigners' awareness of their inability to communicate and empathize with the emotional experiences of natives.

For social work, social alienation translates into the foreigners' inability to integrate professionally in the host state, because, while the lack of alienation is a feeling of satisfaction and positivism regarding the host environment, alienation means the inability of foreigners to grow in terms of economic status. Sometimes migrant groups lead a poor existence economically, due to the lack of integration that would ensure their income, occupation, housing and other material needs. Combating all these variables implies the involvement of the social work system in group intervention activities or community intervention, by creating interpersonal or social communication programs between foreigners and natives (Buzducea, 2009). An advanced stage of integration, called by researchers "optimal communication competence" (Harris & Cronen, 1979), implies the maximum ability to communicate with natives and to make ones own choices in particular situations, which do not fit into the norms dictated by the majority culture.

Unlike social alienation, social isolation (Zhu et al., 2024) and social withdrawal (Li & Wong, 2015) are chronic conditions that involve not only the individual's withdrawal from society, due to cultural non-integration, but also the lack of will in communication with people from their own family, with whom one shares the same cultural traits, aspects that we will analyze in the following section.

The role of mental health in cultural adaptation

A good mental state is that state in which there is harmony between the cognitive, affective and operational components of an individual's psyche. Among the frequent symptoms of mental illness are those related to culture shock (Dutton, 2012), which involve an underestimation of one's own image, decreased self-esteem, low morale, social isolation, lack of satisfaction with life in general, an attitude of self-victimization when faced with adverse social circumstances and other complementary elements, such as depressions. These are symptoms of the dysfunctions caused by the collapse of communication between the foreigner and the natives and a serious imbalance of the stranger's psyche.

As a complement, the feeling of psychic disintegration often manifests itself through a hostile and even aggressive attitude towards the host environment. As explained by the frustration-aggression theory (Bateson, 1941), the foreigner who wants to comply with the hosts' rules but does not succeed becomes frustrated (due to the impossibility of achieving their goals). Such frustrations reduce the desire to adapt. Frustration is always followed by

some form of aggression, which is not always directed at the true source of the frustration. Most of the time, the causes a blockage of the individual's aspirations in the foreign society, and the foreigner develops complexes that are not due to the actions of a single individual. The cause of the blocking of aspirations can be a specific one, prior to the geographical relocation, which causes an exaggerated response to any form of cultural pressure, which is felt by the individual as an external aggression. In such cases, the aggression is indirect, taking a more subtle form, sometimes with a delayed effect.

For several decades, psychiatry has been concerned with creating a clinical profile for mental illnesses suffered by immigrants and refugees. The uprooting of these individuals has been linked to their identity crisis and its associated symptoms, such as paranoia and schizophrenia. These psychoses can be interpreted as the result of the patient's inability to interpret the messages received from the external environment, due to some deficiencies in their ability to correctly differentiate and integrate them (Oppedal et al., 2005). Also, this could be the result of the individual's unsuccessful attempts to convey messages to others, which were incorrectly perceived. Schizophrenics, for example, are unable to discern and differentiate between the multitude of messages addressed to them (Titze et al., 2021).

The development of mental and behavioral deviations in immigrants is not due to some characteristics of their psyche, but mainly to a serious inability to integrate in the new environment (Oppedal et al., 2004). Stress strongly manifests especially in the case of those persons who come from a profoundly different cultural background compared to the culture of the natives. Also, stress intensifies when there is pressure to achieve a rapid integration, and the foreigner is either unable or unwilling to affiliate with a culturally similar group already accepted by the native society, which could reduce tensions and increase the flexibility of the person's adaptability to cultural changes (Bateson, 1941).

A good mental health presupposes a dynamic overlap between the internal value system and external realities, i.e. an internal coherence and a correct exchange of information with the external environment (Huidu & Sandu, 2020). Such internal and external congruence is initially difficult to achieve for newcomers, because they do not yet have an adequate system of communication with the hosts. The foreigner can know a lot about the culture of the host society and still face the impossibility of understanding it and adhering to the same cultural values as the natives (Oppendal et al., 2005). Other foreigners may have a special ability to develop certain social roles, even if they find some aspects of the assumed social role distasteful. Although some foreigners may have the mental capacity to participate in the

emotional and cultural life of the hosts, they may face an impossibility in expressing this through verbal or non-verbal communication methods (Oppendal et al., 2010). The lack of these levers in communicating with the hosts is the cause of many psychological problems associated with social maladjustment (Nakane, 2007). Underestimating one's own image, decreasing self-respect, low morale, social isolation, lack of satisfaction with life in general, all these elements find their roots in the internal psychological imbalance of the unintegrated foreigner (Rudmin, 2003). The persistence of these elements leads to neurotic or psychotic behavior.

Paradoxically, the experience of inner disintegration, which is called "cultural shock" (Dutton, 2012), has the role of a driving force in the transformation of individuals. The inherent tendency to achieve inner balance even leads to a cognitive, affective or operational integration. This inner healing is due to the person's ability to "self-organize", i.e. to endure cultural ruptures caused by environmental change. Such a capacity is not observed in all those who have detached themselves from their own cultures, but mainly in those who have had such an experience after a traumatic event in their life (Maslow, 1964). Polarities, oppositions and psychological dichotomies are usually manifested within a society only by mentally ill individuals, while in the case of healthy individuals, these dichotomies are resolved, polarities disappeare and many oppositions attach to socially accepted cultural trends, obtaining a state of unity within society. In a foreign society, however, even healthy individuals exhibit those manifestations at the border of psychological normality (Maslow, 1964).

In contrast to mental illness, the maintenance of mental health is closely related to the improvement of the means of communication with the hosts, which allows foreigners to make their human connections more efficiently (Bratt Paulston et al, 2012). A healthy personality presupposes the individual's ability to correctly perceive oneself and the world around. This means that if foreigners want to maintain their psychic cohesion in the host society, they must diversify their means of communication and take part in mass or interpersonal communication activities with the locals.

Intercultural identity

The mental health of the foreigner can be an adjuvant of the identity reformation of that individual, as a result of which the migrant's identity is enriched in content and becomes more complex in structure. The foreigner's identity, shaped and conditioned by their original cultural background, together with their loyalty to their native culture extends beyond a geographical perimeter. The term cultural identity refers to that identity

which is acquired as a result of an acculturation process started during early childhood in terms of the child's ways of communicating with a new group from a cultural point of view. Grotevant (1992) calls it "adopted identity", and Phinney (1993) "acquired identity".

Identity is shaped not only by cultural influences from childhood, but also by contacts with new cultural elements, which demonstrate that an individual's identity is not static, but can be considered (Grotevant, 1992) a continuous process of evolution towards complete integration. The appropriation of new cultural elements is parte of the essence of a person's development from a passive identity construction to an active one, based on learning, in other words, from a cultural identity to an intercultural identity. Impressions acquired from the environment, from others and from oneself, as well as retaining them in the mind for future use, become component parts of an evolving personality (Bratt Paulson et al., 2012). Such a development is not smooth, the dynamics of strong stress can, indeed, lead to the regression of the whole process, towards the reaffirmation and re-identification of the person with their ethnic origins, after suffering the alienation produced by maintaining the old identity in a new, non-organic environment (Phinney, 1993). Intercultural development is much more difficult in the case of "marginalization" (Miftode, 2010), which implies that the individual is at the crossroads between several cultural groups, experiencing an acute feeling of self-doubt, loneliness, isolation, restlessness and acute sensitivity.

Although these psychological conflicts are an integral part of the process of intercultural identification, the process itself is much deeper. Just as cultural identity connects a person to a certain culture, intercultural identity connects that person to two or more cultures and, ultimately, to all of humanity. If they manage to find the bridges of communication in a new environment, foreigners experience the existence between different cultures with greater ease than other members of society, which enables them to make choices independent of the patterns of the culture that influenced them during childhood.

An important element of intercultural identity reconstruction is the development of a new self, with personalized cultural orientations. The individualization of culture allows foreigners to lead their existence by making decisions without getting stuck in social conventions (Chen & Starosta, 1998). This requires a good self-knowledge and a knowledge of those around, in order not to reduce existence to social categories and cultural groups. The new intercultural self brings greater self-awareness and self-identity, a sense of authenticity and well-defined goals. The factor that favours the individualization of the cultural identity is basic human

relationships on cultural respect (Rudmin, 2003). Starting from here, the locals get to evaluate each individual based on what is unique to them and not to apply collective stereotypes to foreigners, which implies a good cognitive capacity for particularization and differentiation.

A personalized intercultural identity gives rise to a stable awareness of one's own personality, in the form of self-acceptance, self-respect and the absence of other psychologically deviant states, such as depression or anxiety (Zhu et al., 2024). A personality marked by intercultural identity stands out in that it aims to achieve things of social value, based on tolerance, acceptance, cooperation and interpersonal cohesion.

Conclusions

Intercultural transformation is a process of creating an overall, universal perspective, a synergistic cognition, a new consciousness, born from the awareness of the relative nature of values and from the universalistic nature of man. As the process of cultural transformation of the individual deepens, one is more and more able to realize the unity of humanity, to feel greater compassion and sensitivity towards those who are different, and to locate where the points of convergence are, beyond the obvious differences.

Therefore, the individual moves into a new stage of cultural identification, with a wider social circle than the one they had in their native society. Becoming intercultural means renouncing prejudices and internalizing the fact that humanity resides in individuals beyond any cultural differences. Universalization emphasizes a cognitive orientation based on understanding the deep differences between people and, at the same time, the many points of connection. Also, this process suggests that the individual is not limited to what one has acquired through their culture of origin, but their cultural structure is comprised by enough components that provide them the ability to interact with other cultures.

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