THE ROLE OF LIBRARY IN THE PROMOTION AND SUPPORT OF MULTICULTURALISM

Andra SECELEANU[1],
Aurel PAPARI[2],
Alexandra CUCU[3]

[1]"Andrei Șaguna" University from Constanța/Academy of Romanian
Scientists, Romania, andraseceleanu@andreisaguna.ro
[2]"Andrei Șaguna" University from Constanța/Academy of Romanian
Scientists, Romania, aurelpapari@andreisaguna.ro
[3]"Andrei Șaguna" University from Constanța/ alexa_anton@yahoo.com

Abstract

The appereence of refugees crisis in Europe brought again into discussion the concept of multiculturalism and already exists a national politics rethinking movement. The paper bring into attention the concept of multiculturalism. A special attention is according to the role of the library in the promotion and support of multiculturalism.

Refugee crisis: the end of multiculturalism?

Europe's biggest migration crisis of the last decades and the first time in the history of the European Union when so many refugees came from outside the continent, caused a true cultural shock, both for Europeans and for the refugees, and brought again into discussion the concept of multiculturalism.

There already exists a national politics rethinking movement, such as the opinion expressed by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, that the immigrants must fully integrate into the German society, suggesting that multiculturalism risks to generate social isolation, suburbs such as the Paris periphery, with alienated individuals and where the crime rate is very high.

Nevertheless, the idea is not new and it was not generated by the refugee crisis. In 2010, the Chancellor of Germany states that: "Of course the tendency had been to say, 'Let's adopt the multicultural concept and live happily side by side, and be happy to be living with each other.' But this concept has failed, and failed utterly."

Nicolas Sarkozy: "We have been too concerned about the identity of the person who was arriving and not enough about the identity of the country that was receiving him." "My answer is clearly yes, it (multiculturalism) is a failure". "Of course we must all respect differences, but we do not want a society where communities coexist side by side". (February 11, 2011).

David Cameron: **"**Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We've failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We've even tolerated these segregated

communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values". (5 February 2011).

Today, the need for tolerance and mutual understanding appears more relevant than ever before. We are confronted almost daily with news of acts of violence shaking some part of our globalized world. Faced with such events – and the suffering, destruction and loss of life they cause – we are impelled to renew our efforts to break the cycle of violence and hostility. And we must do everything in our power to ensure that the grief and resentment caused by such events do not jeopardize our work to secure peace in the future.

Multiculturalism – a new idea?

Multiculturalism is not a recent phenomenon, but it is as old as human history since different people and different cultures have always found throughout history the ways of living together, in the same place or at the same time, in peaceful ways and respect for diversity, ingenious flexibility, and resiliency were familiar features of many historic empires such as the Ottoman Empire (Locke, 1955 and Barkey, 2008).

In *OED*, democracy, whose origin goes back to the ancient Greece, is simply defined as "a system of government in which all the people of a country can vote to elect their representatives" and undertakes to protect "fair and equal treatment of everyone in an organization, etc., and their right to take part in making decisions" (Hornby, 2010, p. 388).

The 1950s and 1960s gave rise to the creation of new concepts like multiculturalism and ethnic identity, yet these concepts are a reality that "most countries today are [also] culturally diverse", and "the world's 184 independent states contain over 600 living language groups, and 5000 ethnic groups. In very few countries can the citizen be said to share the same language, or belong to

the same ethno-national group" (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 1. See also Nielson, 1985; Gurr, 1993 and Laczko, 1994). As a result, many new countries across the contemporary global world have had to re-optimize their domestic politics.

Multiculturalism and ethnic identity, like many others, are multifaceted, ambivalent, flexible and fluid concepts to define, even though they immediately denote the perception of different cultures and identities coexisting side by side in larger societies across the world. In *OED*, multiculturalism is defined as "relating to or containing several cultural or ethnic groups within a society", and ethnic minority as "the fact of belonging to a particular race" or "a group of people from a particular culture or of a particular race living in a country where the main group is of a different culture or race" (Hornby, 2010, p. 500). Likewise, Edward Quinn (2006) considers multiculturalism "a contemporary movement" which includes "ethnic and minority groups" and cultures in a given society (p. 270).

Multiculturalism is basically a theory about human freedom and well-being and rests on a distinct conception of the good life. It is grounded in the three-fold belief that human beings are culturally embedded, that every culture represents a limited vision of the good life and benefits from a dialogue with others, and, finally, that a good society should foster conditions of intercultural dialogue and should ideally be dialogically constituted. While appreciating that human beings are culturally embedded and need a stable cultural home, multiculturalism also stresses the importance of active engagement with other cultures. For it, human beings need both stability and openness, both a culture of their own and access to other cultures. It values intercultural dialogue not as a way of coping with the *fact* of cultural diversity, but rather to exploit the *value* of cultural diversity and to reap its ontological, epistemological, moral and other benefits. (pp. 16-8. See also Alibhai-Brown, 2000; Hewitt, 2005; Putnam,

2007 and Uberoi, 2008)

The role of the library in the promotion and support of multiculturalism

Encounters between people of different cultural background have always existed, and always equally, people were thinking about phenomena that were unusual in other cultures. However, those encounters were relatively seldom in early times, but today, they are almost part of the everyday life: the facilitated communication and movement of people has made it possible. At the same time, the facilitated interchange between cultures has jeopardized their very existence, and facilitated the emergence of a cosmopolitan culture, a phenomena often referred to as globalization.

We can state that cultures, which are exposed to the influences (among others), experience continuous intercultural transformation. This would show that basically static models of culture, as largely favored in intercultural research, are inadequate to explain and predict curent culture situations. Hence there is a need to develop a more interactive model of cultural transformation that is capable of explaining the shifts in the cultures that we are experiencing in the world today.

By being exposed to new ideas or a new environment, the society culture changed significantly at all levels, resulting in a shift in culture over time. Shifts in culture can, of course, initiate in society itself, but are more likely to be brought in by an outside culture, with a different set of assumptions, values etc. Shifts can of course be significant, or subtle, they can be fast or slow. Example for subtle shifts can be a shift in only one layer with little effect on the others; it can be a slight change that is in danger of going unnoticed. The significant shifts are easily determined, changing society structure as a whole

while taking place, and over a relatively short period of time (Papari et. all, 2007). Slow shifts are those shifts that occur over a long period of time, at least relatively spoken: the feminist movement was such a slow shift that it took some hundred years and more to change the basic assumptions, the values and attitudes of society.

Fundamental to the occurrence of such a shift is the 'culture shock'. Whereas this is traditionally seen as a profound negative experience while encountering another culture, we would rather define it as anything that has a potential to start shifting variables in the culture system of either the individual or the society as a whole. Adler describes it as: "*Culture shock is thought of as a profound learning experience that leads to a high degree of self-awareness and personal growth. Rather than being only a disease for which adaptation is the cure, culture shock is likewise at the very heart of the cross-cultural learning experience. It is a self-understanding and changed experience*". The culture shock can be evoked by being exposed to any other culture, as a result of being on a "foreign" culture territory, by cultural changes in the home culture or by being exposed to fundamentally different cultural forms on the home ground. The space where the encounter occurs, and how different the cultures are, will have a profound influence on the depth and extend of such a shock. Some argument has been centered, around which shocks occur: following this line of enquiry, there are a multitude of possible shocks, such as the role shock, language shock or cultural fatigue when individuals are exposed to a "foreign" culture (Jay, 2011). Some studies suggest a positive correlation between culture shock and the occurrence of mental illnesses resulting from the stress experienced, while other research has found that culture shock may have a positive influence on social and professional effectiveness, and is defined for this paper as the information exchange between one person and any other

source, transmitting a message displaying properties of a culture different to the one of the receiver's culture.

The term "culture" is used in the same sense as Kim, referring to *"the collective life patterns shared by people in social groups such as national, racial, ethnic, socio-economic, regional, and gender groups"*. This necessarily involves that intercultural communication is also understood to take place outside its traditional domain of "international" communication. Intercultural communication can occur between two nationals of the same country, which have, for example, different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

The complexity of the world and of the political, economical, social, cultural and last but not the least, of the spiritual kind phenomena, oblige us to simplify and to formulate models and scenarios, by which we try to understand the reality and foresee the future (Máiz, R. and F. Requejo, 2005). These models and scenarios have their inherent limits, their conceptual weaknesses, and they are finite in time. Moreover, they become dangerous when they stop to be open models and they are transformed in dogmas. Therefore, any model, regardless of how seducing it could be from the intellectual point of view, must be looked at with cautiousness and evaluated with criticism.

The library and the information services in a diverse cultural and linguistic context, include the preparation of services for all types of users of the library and the preparation of special library services to serve cultural and linguistic groups. Special attention must be given to the groups that are most frequently marginalized in diverse cultural societies: minorities, those who look for shelter and the refugees, those with temporary residence permit, immigrant workers and indigenous communities.

In such a culturally diverse society, the focus should be on the following key-points, which are related to information, literacy, education and

culture: The promotion of the acknowledgement of the positive value of cultural diversity and the encouragement of the cultural dialogue; the encouragement of the linguistic diversity and of the respect for the native language; the assurance of the harmonious coexistence between different languages, which means the learning of foreign languages from an early age; defending the cultural and linguistic heritage, supporting the expression, creation and propagation from within every language; supporting the preservation of oral tradition and the intangibility of the cultural heritage; supporting the integration and participation of people and groups with different cultural backgrounds; encouraging the information recognition in the digital era and mastering its information and communication technology; promoting the linguistic diversification in the virtual space; encouraging the universal access at the virtual space; supporting the knowledge and practices exchange regarding the cultural pluralism (Seceleanu, Papari, 2010).

But the individual is seen as an open system: she/he interacts actively with her/ his environment, mostly through the means of communications. That is the encoding and decoding of messages exchanged with her/his environment.

The individual is further understood to be homeostatic too. That is that the person tries to maintain constant a variety of variables in the meaning structure. At the beginning of any intercultural transformation process, the individual is seen as being in equilibrium: their world view and actions are in line with their meaning structure. If through communication or other encounters the meaning structure is disturbed, in the terminology of Kim, experiences "stress", the individual will aim to actively adapt to regain equilibrium.

If the individual is exposed to other cultural values, a reflection process starts. To various extends, the human mind starts to review, anticipate, generalize, analyze and plan, and starts an active transformation process. The

individual "grows". This adaptation process is dynamic, cyclic and continual, as the individual is in a continuous interchange with its environment. As the environment changes, the equilibrium of the internal meaning structure is continuously disturbed. This requires a continuous adaptation or growth process. While learning and growing, the individual become a multicultural person. Adler (1982) describes it as: *"The identity of man (woman) is based, not on 'belongingness' which implies either owning or being owned by culture, but on a style of self-consciousness that is capable of negotiating ever new formations of reality. In this sense multicultural man (woman) is a radical departure from the kinds of identities found in both traditional and mass societies. He (She) is neither totally part of nor totally apart from his (her) culture; he (she) lives, instead, on the boundary"*

Conclusions

Adequate knowledge on the intercultural communication strategies and on multiculturalism would be the answer to some problems which the postmodern society, and the one that follows, will try to solve.

The library is the place where multicultural education imposes itself as a process, as a main objective that emphasizes the legitimacy of the ethnic diversity, of the values that reflect the cultural pluralism, of the equal opportunity principle, of common cultural respect and tolerance.

After all, "multiculturalism means to offer to everyone the possibility of learning about, preparing for and celebrating cultural diversity.– of race, ethnicity, social class, religion, culture, customs, traditions of the ethnic groups, as well as using a variety of methods and different areas of education.

The ignoring and the improper application of multiculturalism attracts negative aspects: monocultural orientation, marginalization, ethnic and racial

insults, the absence of some significant dialogues between people who are different from a social, ethnic, cultural, stereotypical, ethnocentrism, prejudice, favouritism, discrimination point of view.

The library must hold documents on different supports, for the encounter with other cultures, having the responsibility of informing the public on the history, cultural heritage, customs and contributions of the ethnic groups, and also responsibility of replacing prejudice and distorted perceptions about some groups with information built on accuracy.

Multiculturalism proposes to alleviate this tension by promoting some aspects related to intercultural communication, interpersonal relationships, perspective shift, contextual analysis, understanding of some different points of view and of the way in which cultural factors affect values, attitudes, beliefs, preferences, expectations and behaviour.

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