THE ROMANIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM, BAROMETER OF THE SOCIAL MENTAL PATTERNS

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Abstract: Since the turning point of the December revolution in 1989 up to the present, Romania has undergone radical structural changes at all levels of society: form of government, economy, administration, as well as mentality and social behaviour. As the general democratic transformation of our country has entailed the reformation of the Romanian educational institutions as well, we believe that they reflect habits and mental patterns which, even though perceived as democratic values in the collective mentality of the people, they are not entirely different from the ones specific to the former communist society. The purpose of our study is to highlight the beliefs and attitudes characteristic of the present Romanian system of education which we consider to be a barometer of the society as a whole. In this way we may understand the extent to which democratic values have been internalized by our society.

Keywords: society, patterns, education, mentality, culture

Introduction

Romania's evolution from 1989 to the present has meant a radical and deep transformation process of the political, economic and administrative bodies, the levers of power, the mentalities and the dynamics of the whole society. After 25 years of attempts to build, on the ruins of communist society, a capitalist democracy, adapting the Western myth to the Romanian society's often refractory particular conditions, it is natural to ask ourselves what kind of society has been and is still being built in Romania, a country that prides itself on its European affiliation. Being assigned the mission to reform and reshape consciences, the Romanian educational system has undergone various structural reforms overtime. Viewed from this perspective, we consider it to be a good barometer of the social and cultural values, mentalities and behaviours specific to present Romanian society.

Our study aims to show the extent to which Romania integrates or keeps away from the values of the Western countries whose model it has tried to follow and implement at educational, social, administrative and political levels.

In order to achieve the purpose of our study we consider that Geert Hofstede's theory and method described in his well-known book *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* could offer us a useful framework for our analysis. As he points out, "Every person carries within him or herself patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting which were learned throughout their life." Basing his theory on an analogy with the computing programming, such patterns, which are called "software of the mind", determine human behaviour. That is why, as is further emphasized, to learn something different requires to unlearn what has already been established in our mind, a fact that makes the process of unlearning rather difficult. (Hofstede, 1997: 4)

Seen from this point of view, culture should not be confused with human nature or the personality of an individual, but it should be viewed as a collective phenomenon acquired through a process of learning in a given social environment. Being mental programming

under certain circumstances, culture determines differences among individuals and groups of individuals.

Geert Hofstede's model proposes five operational concepts or dimensions by means of which cultural values can be measured and analyzed. These are defined and explained as follows.

Power distance reflects the degree to which people in a culture accept human inequality and preserve status and power differences among the members of society. In Hofstede's terms, this cultural dimension expresses "the extent to which the less powerful members" of a group or country "accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 1997: 262). As a result, in low power distance cultures the organizational structure is generally flat, whereas high power distant cultures rest on a hierarchical structure which maintains a clear cut distinction between power holders and simple members of society, managers and subordinates.

The two contrasting notions, individualism and collectivism, are related to the differences between individualistic societies that value the self and individual rights, and collectivist societies which foster group-oriented values and behaviour, individuals acting as strong and cohesive groups.

Uncertainty avoidance stands for people's capacity to cope with unknown, unusual situations, or with the uncertainty of the future. In general, high uncertainty avoidance cultures try to adopt gradual changes, while low uncertainty avoidance cultures show a greater degree of tolerance for changeable situations.

The opposition between masculinity and femininity points out the distinction between the societies that attach more importance to masculine qualities such as power, competitiveness, pragmatism, ambition etc, and those founded on feminine values like modesty, tenderness, caring for others and concern with the quality of life.

Long-term orientation refers to pragmatic societies that "foster the virtues oriented towards the future rewards, in particular perseverance and thrift" (Hofstede, 1997: 261). Conversely, short-term oriented societies praise traditional values and the past, and place emphasis on the present rather than the future.

Methodology of Research

The cultural dimensions enumerated above form the basis of the survey that we used in order to study the mental programmes of a social category which, in our opinion, may be representative of the entire Romanian society.

The research questions we had in mind when administering the dimensions described above were the following: What are the mentalities and social behaviours of a society that faced the communist deconstruction and experienced the post-communist reconstruction? Or, narrowing our research to the educational system, what is the extent to which it reflects new social and cultural values, corresponding to the general mutations faced by society? To what extent do these elements represent parts of the European behavioural patterns?

We questioned 50 high school and university teachers from Ploieşti starting from the model of cultural dimensions suggested by Geert Hofstede in *Cultures and Organizations. Software of the Mind*.

Using only four dimensions of Hofstede's pattern, we asked our respondents to tick the descriptions that best fitted their opinions and beliefs. After collecting the data, we counted their responses, and after summing them up we calculated the percentages that corresponded to each type of pattern suggested by the participants in the study. The results are shown in the table below.

Table 1. Dimensions of Romanian society

Large power distance vs. small power distance	77.57% vs. 22.43 %
Individualism vs. collectivism	33.67 % vs. 66.33 %
Weak uncertainty avoidance vs. strong uncertainty avoidance	20.43 % vs. 79.57 %
Feminity vs. masculinity	46.40 % vs. 53.60 %

We consider that our findings may illustrate Romanian teachers' "patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting mental programmes" (Hofstede, 1997: 4), indicating the degree to which their behaviour is predetermined by their collective past.

Our intention is not to comparatively analyse Romania and other states, as in Hofstede's approach, because such an enterprise would involve taking into consideration certain social, economic and political factors specific to the respective countries on which we do not have the necessary information. Therefore, our study will simply analyse the data offered by our respondents, trying to move from the specific to the general in order to draw some conclusions.

Data analysis
3.1. A large power distance society

As is shown in figure 1, a significant percentage of participants (77.57 %) have a high distance power value. From a list of 14 cultural traits used by Hofstede to measure the extent to which people accept power distribution in society, the majority chose 10 items representative for a large power distance society.
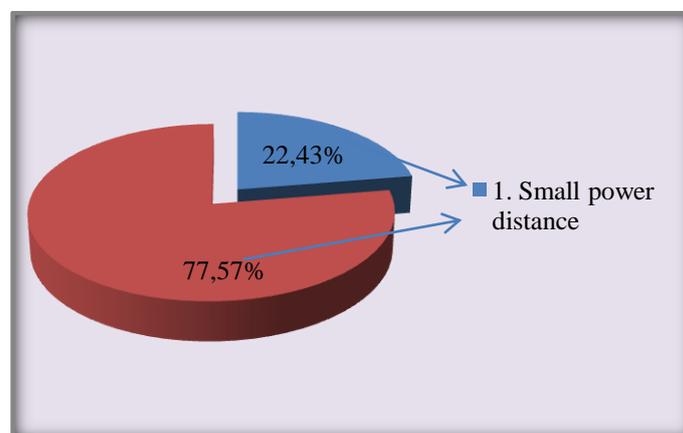

Figure 1. Large power distance vs. small power distance

With respect to the general social norm, the participants' options indicate that they accept social inequalities considering them to be normal. Equally important, they accept the polarization of society and believe that less powerful people should be dependent on the more powerful members of society.

As far as family and school are concerned, they appreciate moral values such as obedience to and respect for parents and teachers, and believe in the authoritative role of the teacher who is viewed as an initiator and controller of the instructional process, or as a source of knowledge.

In connection with the workplace, the respondents picked out the characteristics referring to the practice of centralized decision making, a hierarchical system of organisation based on salary inequality, and a wide salary range between top and bottom employees. It should also be noted that, according to their answer, the ideal manager's features consist in paternalistic leadership and benevolent autocracy.

As seen above, there is a common behaviour pattern that reflects the respondents' tendency to avoid taking part in the exercise of power. Attempting an explanation of their beliefs, we can state that, in spite of the profound social and political changes undergone by society, this way of thinking and acting echoes the avoidance behaviour that was typical of people's psychology in the former totalitarian regime, when obedience to authority meant protecting oneself against any aggression exerted by the state apparatus and its representatives.

On the other hand, interpreted within the present socio-economic context, the respondents' inclination to submit to authority, which results in their preference for centralized decision making and their acceptance of the superiors' orders uncritically or without showing opposition to what they dislike, may be justified by the fear of losing their jobs. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that ultimately this kind of fear generates attitudes specific to the complex of power that make people consent to differential treatment, wide salary discrepancies between management and employees, or other forms of inequalities among people.

3.2. A collectivist society

As to the opposition between the collectivist and individualist features of societies, the percentages that we found, namely 33.67 % for individualism and 66.33 % for collectivism, speak for themselves. From a list of 12 cultural items referring to these differences, most respondents selected 8 collectivist characteristics.
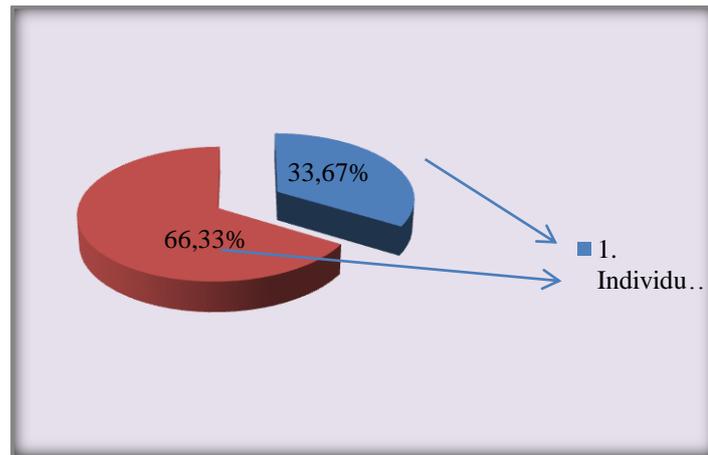
Figure 2. Individualism vs. collectivism

In point of norm and family, most responses show that identity is seen as belongingness to a social group, and not as individuality of a person. Participants believe that children should be taught collectivist principles such as "to think in terms of we" and not "in terms of I" (Hofstede, 1997: 76), or to avoid dissenting opinions that might result in confrontation among the members of the group. That is why harmonious relationships and high communication within the group are strongly appreciated.

In relation to school, the respondents' answers reveal that students should primarily know "how to do" and not "how to learn" (Hofstede, 1997: 76). Moreover, diplomas are believed to be a means of reaching a higher social status and are not necessarily perceived as a way of getting self-esteem or financial independence.

As far as the workplace is concerned, most participants chose two features that reflect the importance attached to the group as part of an organisation: for instance, running an institution lies in managing groups instead of individuals, and group relationships should prevail over tasks and not vice-versa.

It is worth mentioning that the respondents' attitude is similar to the collectivist behaviour which was dominant in the former communist society. Collectivism and cooperative forms of organization constituted the ideological basis of the totalitarian Romanian state which rejected bourgeois individualism and its related values considering them not only outdated but also threatening for the socialist development of the country. That is why, for the Communist leaders "it was imperative to clear the field in order to lay the foundations of the new socialist culture by throwing away the remains and wastes of the bourgeois culture, in fact, the arguments for national identity" (Tismăneanu et al., 2006: 489).

Throughout the years, this collectivist behaviour pattern has been reproduced and transmitted from generation to generation in various environments such as family, school, workplace and in institutions. At present, it can be felt in people's tendency to value harmonious relationships at work, to avoid confrontations among the members of the group they belong to, or to perceive the institution in which they work as a large family that requires commitment and submission. In addition, there is a general cultural tendency to value the interests of the group and not the ones of the individual.

3.3. A strong uncertainty avoidance society

It is noteworthy that the participants' answers reveal a high degree of social anxiety (79.57 %). From a list of 14 items characterizing the opposition between weak and strong uncertainty avoidance societies, they chose 11 features that bring to the fore specific behaviour under stressful conditions.
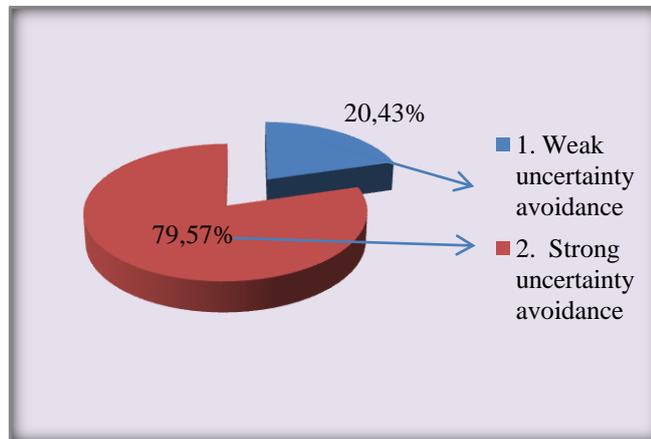

Figure 3. Weak uncertainty avoidance vs. strong uncertainty avoidance

With respect to the general social norm, most answers point out the perception of uncertainty as a continuous threat or a subjective feeling of anxiety that should be avoided during one's lifetime. Regarding the attitude to risk, only familiar risk is accepted, while uncertain or ambiguous situations are believed to produce fear.

As to the items referring to family and school, the respondents consider that children should be taught rules of conduct against "what is dirty and taboo" (Hofstede, 1997: 167). Furthermore, school is supposed to offer students security and comfort in structured learning classes where teachers are models of knowledge. In such a context, precision and punctuality are seen as natural attitudes and not as something that is acquired through learning.

Now as regards work stress, most options emphasize the emotional urge to work hard under the guidance of the principle that "time is money". It is also relevant that deviant ideas or behaviour from the norm are rejected due to their stressful potential, whereas the feeling of security at work is perceived as beneficial for motivation. As in the case of school, companies and organizations should be rule-oriented in order to reduce uncertainty.

The need to avoid anxiety, which was highlighted by the majority of the participants, falls into a conservative mental pattern that explains people's general resistance to change and to what is different from entrenched habits (for instance, new organizational regulations, requalification, and change of job). It is a fact that people are inclined to prefer low-paid secure jobs in the public sector rather than highly-paid insecure jobs in the private sector.

The perception of change as a possible threat justifies why many of the reforms implemented so far in education, economy, technology, and administration have been accepted with reserve by the Romanians. As concerns the educational system, this attitude is reflected in teachers' resistance to the application of new teaching methods as well as in the slow modernization of the educational process.

3.4. A mixed society

As seen in the figure below, we cannot clearly state whether the participants perceive society as being masculine or feminine, due to the fact that the percentages are quite close. From a list of 15 cultural traits discussed by Hosftede, our respondents selected 8 items representing masculine features and 7 items for the feminine ones.
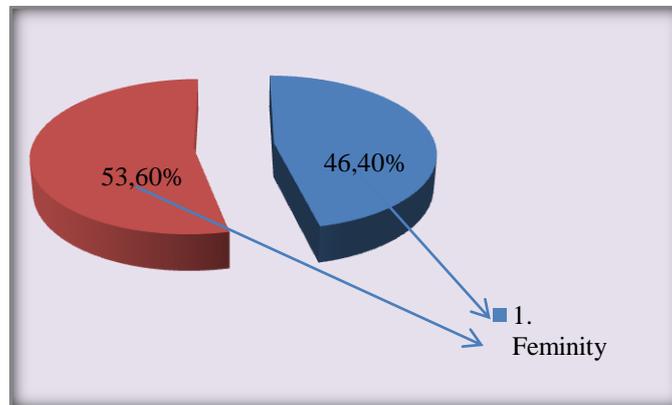

Figure 4. Feminity vs. masculinity

The respondents' answers referring to the general social norm of a masculine society point out that material success and progress are dominant values of the Romanian culture, money and things being seen as important for the social status.

As far as family is concerned, most participants have distinct expectations of male and female roles, or believe in gender differences. For instance, tenderness characterizes women, while toughness and ambition are men's qualities. Equally, within the family, it is the father who is responsible for dealing with facts, while the mother is supposed to be more emotionally involved in the family life. As to boys and girls, they are seen as opposite entities when it comes to conflicts: "girls cry, boys don't; boys should fight back when attacked, girls shouldn't fight" (Hofstede, 1997: 117).

Regarding education, most responses show that teachers' masculine qualities are highly appreciated. For instance, it is brilliance that matters in the educational process and not feminine qualities such as friendliness.

In addition, the answers describing managers as being decisive and assertive indicate that the values associated with male features and behaviour are common perceptions.

The cultural traits referred to as feminine reflect opinions that are opposite to the ones described above. Thus, from the point of view of the general social norm, the respondents acknowledge that caring for others and warm relationships among people are important attributes of our society.

 The same sympathetic attitude towards the weak is emphasized by the respondents' answers related to the educational system. In their opinion, the average student represents the norm, and failing in school is viewed as a minor accident.

The responses referring to the work place reveal the general tendency of a feminine culture that lays stress "on equality, solidarity, and quality of work life", as well as on the idea that members of society "work in order to live" (1997: 117).

In the light of these considerations, we are of the opinion that the coexistence of the two cultural dimensions in Romanian society may result from the fact that our country has not reached a stable level of modernization to enable the formation of durable patterns of thinking and coherent social attitudes. Nevertheless, the slightly higher percentage of masculine values is likely to indicate a rising trend in the future.

Conclusions

As a barometer of the mental patterns of Romanian society, the educational system reflects cultural values and social attitudes that continue a traditional way of thinking with roots in the country's communist history. On the other hand, new mentalities have developed in the context of Romania's multilevel reconstruction after the collapse of the communist regime, becoming patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting in a new type of society formed "via the democratic process within the democratic procedures, and as a democratic course moves forward." (Sartori, 1987: 8).

The data analysis led us to the conclusion that values and ideologies belonging to Romania's communist past, such as large power distance and collectivism, persist in the present-day mentality and social behaviour. It is true that "cultural values can change over time" especially "when political, societal, and economic environments change" (2006: 41), but it seems that deeply ingrained collective mentalities, which are characterized by continuation and strong resistance to adaptation, function as old cultural codes perpetuated in a new socio-cultural milieu.

The large power distance dimension of our culture stems from a paternal vision of power that may be a nostalgic reminiscence of the only leader and one-party system characteristic of communist society. Today, remnants of this mental pattern can be identified in people's tendency to appreciate authoritarian leaders at different levels (government, political parties or institutions) and believe that such leaders are able to create order and stability in society. It is also relevant that, although unequal distribution of power, status differences and subordination to authority are generally seen as legitimate, people are also attracted to the idea of another leadership style that should be more cooperative and focused on the participation of the individual. This paradox, which reflects the contradiction between how they actually behave and what they wish, seem to derive from the same dual psychological mechanism specific to the way of living under the communist regime.

Strongly developed in communism as a state ideology, collectivist mentality annihilated the values of individualism and private property as the totalitarian aim was "organising masses, not classes (...); not citizens with opinions about and interests in." (Arendt, 1962: 308). The ideology of common good, equality and reciprocity resulted in long-term effects as the Romanians had to relearn what individual freedom, self-reliance, ownership and decentralization meant. As long as state intervention is still viewed as a principal means of supporting and improving people's social condition, we may state that these effects are still felt today.

The strong uncertainty avoidance dimension in our culture is in sharp contrast to the weak uncertainty avoidance value specific to the former communist society where, although people lacked freedom and feared political persecution, long-term stable employment and the relative uniformity of the members of society were perceived as security factors. At the

present time, people's feeling of uncertainty is justified by the rapid change and instability that characterize postcommunist Romania in its way to modernization. Generally, stress originates in a variety of factors that can be economic and financial (job loss, unemployment, financial precariousness and instability that could entail the inability to pay bills, loan installments and high quality medical treatment, etc.) or professional (requalification, too many tasks at work, adjustment to new technologies and requirements etc.). People's low tolerance of risk and ambiguous situations has been converted into defense mechanisms such as the need for consensus and written rules within groups and organisations, or, conversely, into negative emotions concerning any kind of control, workplace rules and policies (for instance, haste to complete work tasks, misconduct, avoidance of long-term goals, etc.).

The ambiguity of Romanian society in point of its feminine and masculine dimensions is due to a combination of factors. Thus, on the one hand, the belief that men and women have distinct roles in society is imposed by a powerful tradition and, on the other hand, values such as gender equality, quality of life and sympathy for others are new patterns of thinking internalized by collective mentality in the context of Romania's European integration.

As E. Durkheim shows, a collective feeling 'is a result of common life, a product of the actions and reactions that occur among individual consciences, and if this feeling resounds in each of them, this is possible due to its special power that comes from its collective origin." (2004, p.49) Therefore, we may say that, although the formation of mental and behaviour patterns requires a long cumbersome process, the restructuring and transformation of Romanian society have laid the basis for their crystallization.

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