

INTERCULTURAL TRANSFORMATION: NEW CULTURES, VALUES AND ATTITUDES

SECELEANU, Andra-PAPARI*, Aurel-UGUREANU, Carmen**
 ROMANYA/ROMANIA/РУМЫНИЯ

ABSTRACT

We live in the midst of rapid cultural change and increasing intercultural connectedness. Undoubtedly, television and cinema, the Internet, changes in political structure and international business expose us everyday to new cultures, values and attitudes, whether or not actively perceived by us. New forms of communication have brought the vision of a “global village” and “globalization”, not only of business and finance, but also of culture.

Our paper will analyse the intercultural 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 source of such a message can be either a person, in an interpersonal communication process, or any form of mass media or other form of media. For the purpose of our paper, the source of such a message can hence be a film or television programme, that displays to its viewer a cultural difference. The viewing of such material is hence an intercultural communication process.

Key Words: Intercultural, transformation, cultur, communication.

An essential element to comprehend the present status of mankind is represented by the way we define and understand modernity. It can be seen as the cultural development of a global civilization, as a consequence of a process of convergence of cultures, of their synthesis, or as an emergence, based on the peculiarities of a specific culture, an original matrix of possible cultures proposed to humanity.

As far as we know until now, one thing is certain indeed: the mankind enters a new stage of its millennial development. It would be rational to admit that, the future being absolutely unpredictable, we can locate only, considering the past and in the perspective of the realities of the present, the signs of a possible future evaluation, and we can evaluate their chances to be achieved.

* Bdulbal. Labusneanur nr. 13, costanta 900916, ROMANYA. **e-mail:** Kontakt@andreisaguna. ro;
 univsaguna@tomrad.ro

** Bdulbal. Labusneanur nr. 13, costanta 900916, ROMANYA.

What can we say today with certain accuracy about the future refers to generalization, during one or two generations, of the capitalist type economy, a process accompanied by the extension of the democratic political regimes, in forms and peculiarities depending on the geopolitical context of the moment when the transformation takes place in the system.

From here on we enter the moving sands of speculation and forced analogies, which can generate not desired confusions and false conclusions. Such a false conclusion is that concerning the obligation of the existence of a single center of the world. The fact is that the world does not need a center, but it needs the interaction of several power centers, and the radiation of ideas and development models, to generate other changing forces so needed for the progress of mankind. The world of the future will be one of diversity, and diversity will be the engine of the evaluations at the global level. Diversity however involves mandatory tolerance and dialogue.

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 future.

If the defenses of peace are to be constructed in the minds of men and women, we do well to recognize that our minds and hearts are increasingly influenced by education and mass media. And so, in the age of information and communication technologies, we have new opportunities to find the practical ways of using these tools of expression for sharing our diverse lives with an eye to building peace.

The complexity of the world and of the political, economical, social, cultural and last but not the least 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. 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 how seducing could it be from the intellectual point of view, must be seen with cautiousness and evaluated with criticism.

I. Cultural Acquisition and Modification

Encounters between people of different cultural background have existed forever, and equally forever, people were thinking about phenomena that were unusual in other cultures. However, those encounters were relatively seldom in early times, today, they are almost part of 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.

The political changes in turn have also influenced the globalization of media available in those countries experiencing the opening of their systems, as well as the availability of communication resources such as Internet. Although the culture shock, if one wish to use that term that is experienced, differs in degree by the circumstances that surround it. A culture shock of cinema and television will be less great than that experienced when conducting a cross cultural, interactive conversation over the internet, and even more when dealing with foreign business partners.

A culture shock “is thought of as a profound learning experience that leads to a high degree of self-awareness and personal growth” (Adler, 1987). This situation would suggest that we find ourselves in a continual learning approach, where we adapt to the new. Kim (1996) notes: “Intercultural communication experiences are intermittently stressful in varying degrees [...] an outcome of intercultural stress adaptation experiences is an intercultural transformation in internal conditions.” .

Following this reasoning, 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 current culture situations. There is hence a need to develop a more interactive model of cultural transformation that is capable to explain the shifts in the cultures that we are experiencing in the world today.

By looking at an individual experiencing intercultural transformation, we can possibly explain a communal cultural shift.

In the attempt to explain what defines a culture we have identified various distinctive concepts: such as the space and time concepts, perception, language etc. These concepts can be broadly classified as parts, processes and outcomes of three categories, or variables, that interact in ‘culture’. This categorization leans towards the Trompenaars and Hempden-Turner model of culture, whereas culture is a set of three concentric circles, existing out of basic assumptions, norms and values and artifacts and products (Trompenaars, 1997) Rather than seeing the three variables as distinctive elements, they should be seen as interacting together, and with it in a constant change. They display, to some extend, cybernetic properties: the basic assumptions influence the values and norms and those in turn influence the artifacts and products, however equally changes in the artifacts and products can change values and norms and in turn change basic assumptions. Any such process is of course primarily a process in the individual, that will then in turn influence the culture surrounding him or

her, and that may lead, gradually, to a culture shift; or more precisely in a shift in the behavior of any element.

For example: while during the industrialization it was a basic assumption that the workers had virtually no right, the challenging of that assumption through the various Marxist and socialist movements have gradually shifted this basic assumption. Primarily the shift may have been encountered by only one person, who then shifted the norms and values of the workers, and with it their basic assumptions as well as their artifacts and products: the assumption shifted to the fact that the workers have rights, and the behavior changed to claiming those rights. While in the early days of the Marxist movement this ‘basic assumption’ was only seen by some, namely those aligned with the communist, Marxist and socialist ideas, the forced change in behavior and values gradually shifted the basic assumption of society towards the assumption that workers have, at least some, rights. A full detailed account of such a movement would of course go far beyond the scope of this paper, it can however be noted that the shift created an immense follow up in changes in society: from giving the right to vote equally to the establishment of trade unions, to legalizing of parties that were aligned with that idea, to the fact of making this commitment part, at least in some form, of most democratic constitutions. Another major attempt to shift basic assumptions can of course be seen in the feminist movement.

The point is that 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 the own society, 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. Slow shifts are those shifts that occur over a long period of time, at least relatively spoken: The feminist movement is such a slower shift, taking some hundred years and more to change the basic assumptions, the values and attitudes of society.

Fast shifts are dramatic revolution like developments: the end of the Third Reich was a fast shift, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe etc. The shift is abrupt, and changes society values fundamentally over a very short period of time. This discussion of fundamental changes in an entire society is of course a dramatized view of what occurs in the individual when exposed to a society with a fundamentally different culture. However the similarities are striking. In both situations one or more individuals are exposed to ‘foreign’ concepts of life: a capitalist view of economy, a hierarchically structured society with deep respect for authority, a deeply individualistic society. While

adaptation is not necessarily the outcome, the individual will start reflecting on the concept, and may choose to adapt parts or the entire new outlook.

Fundamental to the occurrence of such a shift is a ‘culture shock’. While 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*” (Adler, 1987). 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 fact 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. Some studies suggest a positive correlation between culture shock and the occurrence of mental illnesses resulting from the stress experienced (Kinzie, 1980) while other research has found that culture shock may have a positive influence on social and professional effectiveness (Ruben, 1970).

II. Communication and Culture Transformation

Intercultural communication 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 source of such a message can be either a person, in an interpersonal communication process, or any form of mass media or other form of media. For the purpose of this paper, the source of such a message can hence be a film or television programme, which displays to its viewer a cultural difference. The viewing of such material is hence an intercultural communication process. While it can generally be said, that most people are able to adjust, Kim points out that “*certain individuals, although in the minority, may strongly resist such internal change.*” (Kim, 1996).

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 impact of such a communication is understood to be variable. A communication impact is higher in a situation where the personal involvement of the receiver is more actively involved in the communication process. A person living in another country experiences hence a strong impact, whereas a television viewer has a relatively low impact.

The intercultural cultural transformation is understood to be the result of such an encounter, as it occurs in the person that has received such a message. This might be a very insignificant change in a single, low involvement communication situation, or a significant change in an active discussion. The transformation is seen as any shift in the artifacts and production, in the values and norms or in the basic assumptions of that person.

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

The individual is further understood to be homeostatic to. 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, analyses 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.

The stress level needs to reach a certain level before active adaptation can take place: this can be reached by either continuous exposure or radical exposure. Before such stress levels are reached, the change in the environment may be ignored or seen as irrelevant: very little adaptation or growth will take place. If a certain level is reached, the adaptation will take place. The stress level is depending on the need for adaptation imposed from the outside and the willingness to adapt from the inside of the individual.

Following the discussion above, we can make the following assumptions:

1. A person is an open system: it is in continuous interaction with its environment through output and input.

- 2.** Each person has his/her internal meaning structure, which is composed of artifacts, products, values, norms, and basic assumptions.
- 3.** The internal meaning structure is inherently logical in itself and interconnected, it is, in that state, in an equilibrium.
- 4.** The person aims to maintain this equilibrium: she/he is homeostatic.
- 5.** If the environment of the person changes, the equilibrium gets disturbed.
- 6.** Any change in the equilibrium causes stress.
- 7.** If the stress reaches a certain level, the person will aim to restore the equilibrium.
- 8.** To regain the equilibrium, the internal meaning structure has to get modified to accommodate the changed environment.

In a direct intercultural encounter, the individual experiences inevitably difficulties in communicating: due to other cultural premises and assumptions of the other party. Communication takes the active form of direct conversation (with its immediate feedback and propelled cybernetic adaptation process) or the form of a limited feedback conversation or exposure. The ‘otherness’ projected by the other party will inevitably evoke some reflection about the person’s own cultural premises and assumptions. The degree of the heterogeneity of the ‘other’, and the context and feedback of the communication, is of course a determining factor in the need for a reflective process. If the heterogeneity is high, and the context low, the impact of such an encounter will only call for a very limited amount of reflection. If the context is high, and diversity equally high, then the reflection process has to be more in-depth, it is challenged more significantly. Once such cultural ‘otherness’ is perceived, and the individual is confronted with the need for some kind of adaptation to accommodate the ‘other’, the internal meaning system is disturbed. The individual is reacting with discomfort and uncertainty: the internal equilibrium is propelled into disequilibrium. Confronted with a significantly large change in the cultural environment, a large scale adaptation and growth takes place. As in the case of immigrants, who moved to an alien culture, Kim suggests: “Within the first year in a new culture, an individual may experience nearly one third of what Holmes and Rahe considered the 43 most significant life changes” (Kim, 1996).

The culture shock, the generic intercultural stress, is the result of such an intercultural encounter. It requires that the individual adapts his /her behavior at least temporarily to regain equilibrium and to cope with the situation. This requires the suspension of certain behavior, and possibly norms and values and basic assumptions, and the accommodation of new behavior and adaptation of norms, values and basic assumptions to accommodate those new ways. This may, initially, meet with conscious or unconscious resistance of the individual to adapt. This causes additional stress. The adaptation, the accommodation of

the new ways of thinking, perceiving and acting, causes can result, according to Kim in “temporary personality disintegration, or even ‘breakdown’ in some extreme cases. Intercultural stress is therefore viewed as the internal resistance of the human organism against its own cultural evolution. As stress is said to be responsible for suffering, frustration and anxiety, it also must be credited as an impetus for learning, growth and creativity for the individual. Thus, temporary disintegration is viewed as the very basis for subsequent growth in the awareness of life conditions and the ways to deal with them” (Kim, 1996).

What results out of the process of disintegration and adaptation, of stress and growth is a cyclic, forward and upward moving process in which the internal meaning structure is continuously leaping forward.

At the starting point the individual experiences stress; the internal meaning structure is disturbed. It acquires the energy for adaptation to overcome the stress experience. The individual then leaps forward to a new, adapted meaning structure. At some point, new stress may arise: the stress causes a draw back, a new disintegration and questioning of the current meaning structure. In a new leap, the individual adapts again. With the individuals' growth, the society of which they are part of also grows. In the words of Kim: “Ultimately, the intercultural communication experiences of the individuals contribute to the evolution of the social systems of which they are part”.

While learning and growing, the individual also learns to better cope with intercultural stress. Some indications are that the more stress is experienced, the more adaptation takes place (Ruben and Kealey, 1979). Through the continuous stress-adaptation-growth process, the individual learns to ‘function’ in the new environment: their internal meaning structure is expanded to accommodate the new environment, and the individual is able to experience what is beyond the borders of its previous cultural consciousness. Resulting out of intercultural encounters, out of the stress, growth and adaptation is a new ‘cultural conditioning’ of the individual: the individual grows to become a multicultural person. This state is then characterized by the person becoming open to cultural transformation and growth, and a loosening of cultural bindings to any one particular culture. 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”.

Equally to becoming an ‘intercultural’ person, intercultural encounters and the stress-adaptation- growth process lead to a learning progress in the individual, resulting in a broadened understanding “of human conditions and cultural differences and a view of things that are larger than any one cultural

perspective" (Tanase, 1968) This way of viewing things will of course, in return, influence the ability to react flexible in an intercultural encounter: the intercultural person will have the flexibility to adapt to the situation, and creatively manage any intercultural stress and possible conflict." At this stage, one achieves the maximum capacity to communicate with individuals who are significantly different in cultural backgrounds, and are able to make deliberate choices of actions in specific situations rather than simply being dictated by the normative courses of action in a given culture" (Seceleanu, 2005)

A related 'encounter' can occur in the case of a TV show: the heroes displayed may be seen as possible role models, and as such the internal meaning structure may be modified to accommodate for possible new behavior of the hero in the individual's own behavior.

This discussion, up to this point, can be summarized in the following axioms:

- 1.** Through various means the individual is exposed to 'alien' cultures.
- 2.** The means can be low in context, or high in context. Equally the cultural gap can be large or narrow.
- 3.** Intercultural encounters are stressful in varying degrees, owing to the participants cultural differences, and to the amount and depth of culture involved (low- or high- context of the situation).
- 4.** The stress facilitates adaptation: the higher the stress, the more adaptation is required to adapt.
- 5.** Most individuals are able to adapt: some have a greater facility to accommodate otherness in their internal meaning structure than others.
- 6.** The outcome of such an adaptation is a change in the internal meaning structure of that individual: an intercultural transformation.
- 7.** Intercultural transformation influences and it is reflected in an increased cognitive, affective and behavioral capacity.
- 8.** The increased cognitive, affective and behavioral capacity facilitates future intercultural encounters: such encounters will cause less stress, requiring less adaptation, which is easier to achieve.

The interchange of economy, politics, the local and the global is particularly interesting in the commercial media. Primarily the commercial media depends on the economy for revenue; it hence has to obey to the demands of its source of income. Equally it has to adhere to political norms. This of course in turn makes the programming profane and uncritical of the status quo. On the other side, the media has to satisfy the consumer: giving access to both local and global media content for identification. With the main target to reach as many viewers as possible, in as many markets as possible, the media has to adapt to the local

consumer, and the majority as a whole. A platform for alternative views can hence be no longer allowed, as that would sacrifice the total amounts of viewers.

While describing the process of becoming ‘multicultural’, one of the important aspects of our discussion is the internal meaning structure, or the system of assumptions, values and behavior. This internal system is aimed to be ‘logical’, its basic assumptions must be able to lead to the values and to displayed behavior, or in other words, the internal meaning structure is in equilibrium. . If the environment changes, our internal meaning structure gets disturbed, and we hence have to adopt after a certain pressure occurs: this can well be a small adoption to accommodate behavior that is new, or a major adaptation changing values and assumptions. Our worldview is of course subject to the reality that we experience around us: it is the ‘real world’: family, friends and colleagues; but it is also the ‘non-real’ world: the world of television and media, the world of the abstract. Both worlds have equally an important impact into our meaning structure, and give the impulses to change and adopt our meaning structure. In this view, the concern for, for example, children being exposed to extremely violent children’s programming seems extremely realistic. Research concluded that for example people with high television consumption estimate the crime rate clearly above the ‘real’ crime rate. This shows how their view was shaped by the influence of media (Adler, 1987).

Cultures have clearly moved closer together. In addition to the traditionally understood symbolism, there is something like an internationally understood symbolism and ‘the popular’; the world-wide understood meaning system that is displayed in the ‘cosmopolitan’ culture.

Does this mean that the local cultures will be completely eroded? No, for the time being that is not the case. The internal meaning structures are still focused, when arising, to our direct environment, the ‘home environment’. Although this is no longer as distinct as it was, and the individual transforms, via media usage and intercultural connectedness, it maintains the home environment as its base. This is particularly true for those individuals that never physically move from their own culture. Their meaning structure incorporates some ‘cosmopolitan’ or universal culture, but it also maintains a strong link to the home culture. The development over time is, of course, less predictable, but might well be somewhat brighter for the existence of the local cultures and the protection of the ‘heritage’, than it is seen by some very pessimistic scholars.

Cultures do converge, new identities do arise. Imagined and real communities are formed and dissolved. People do shift through cultures, and identities. But the underlying culture still determines a lot of the emerging cultures: the local focus is still present, and we have not reached the universal culture. It is also not, and that is often confused, the disappearance of certain cultural attributes that make a culture disappear or no longer existing. A culture

is more than just the attributes that are displayed; it is deeper, more profound system that makes the cultures distinct. Cultures converge, but they do not disappear, as yet.

Our paper has aimed to give an overview of the complexities of culture and globalization, society and the individual. With the emergence of new communication forms, further research is needed to identify the impact of the possible new communities and communication possibilities that arise. Equally, the influence of mass media and in particular commercial media merits further attention. Their influence on shaping the individual's reality is still largely contested; particular problems that arise are the democratic culture and the national cultures. Another important research question is the rise of neo-fascist and anti-democratic tendencies in various cultures, and their connection to cultural variables and globalization.

The creative employment of new technologies will play a vital role in improving the quality, effectiveness and reach of education. We have to proceed strategically. New technologies must be introduced in a coherent and sustainable way. Due regard must likewise be given to local development, and the preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity. All of these are essential if we seek to develop mutual understanding between cultures.

It is known the central role that learning plays in sustainable development and its contribution in particular to poverty reduction and income generation, empowerment and reduction in socio-economic disparities, consolidation of democracy, disease prevention and sustainable health and the protection of the environment.

Development of education is sine qua non for creation of knowledge societies. A knowledge society cannot exist without highly educated citizens and a well-trained workforce, social cohesion and the competitiveness depending on our ability to exploit the potential of ICTs for learning. Education is one of the most important factors in creating knowledge societies and cultures of tolerance.

We are aware that we do not live in a perfect world, that our democracies must be consolidated. However, they have a merit: they operate according to a system of values favorable to find solutions by dialogue, tolerance and respect of the difference. These positive values have that power of fascination that gives them the force to change things in good, provided that we believe in them and we use them with responsibility.

Furthermore, the convergence of cultures has to be studied in more detail. While the field of what makes a culture has been elaborated and solidified, the predicting theories of cultural convergence are still not developed. Also there is a need for further research into the different theories of intercultural exchange, the appropriateness, usefulness and relevance of developed theories has to be

tested against reality. For this a more profound set of research methods needs development. In the end, it is the almost unlimited human capacity for adaptation and self-organization that makes the area of intercultural encounters and cultural convergence so interesting. And with the further development of intercultural-connectedness the field for further research seems endless.

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