

## ***Social Cognitions and Cultural Dimensions in the Romanian Educational Field***

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study, conducted on a sample of 522 subjects, was to explore the main profiles of subjects, in terms of cultural dimensions and personal autonomy patterns, belonging to the Romanian educational environment, evidencing the role of cultural factors in generating a problematic profile (deficient personal autonomy, expressed by low self-determination, low self-esteem and externalist attributional patterns), regardless of the generational or organizational (pre-university vs. university) characteristics of the subjects. The intergenerational analysis carried out shows the highest level of autocratic opening (i.e. power distance) and duplicitous pattern (i.e. social cynicism) for the young generation, in comparison with the older ones. The paper also discusses the implications of these profiles for assessing the modernization process in the Romanian educational environment.

**Keywords:** Hofstede's model, social axioms, personal autonomy, education, intergenerational comparison.

## ***Culture and Personality in the Romanian Educational Field***

The key challenge for our research is to establish a local diagnostic based on the social axioms model and Hofstede's dimensions, together with several dimensions related to personal autonomy (self-determination, locus of control, self-esteem). The analysis, carried out in the field of education, aimed to identify the role of cultural factors in combination with personality factors in producing a symptomatology with several communitarian pathological accents described in previous systemic approaches (Miclea et al., 2007, Ciotlăuș et al., 2011).

On the one hand, the model constructed by Geert Hofstede provided some general diagnosis for Romania, one that focused on the global population while data was collected on representative samples (Luca, 2005; Gavreliuc, 2011). Similarly, this model has been used in an indirect way for assessing the dominant organizational culture in Romanian schools (Iosifescu, 2003; Mălureanu & Matache, 2008; Iosifescu et al., 2013; Gavreliuc, 2016), without operating with the specific instrument promoted for this task by Geert Hofstede (VSM94) (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). On the other hand, the social axioms model has been applied on a representative sample in Romania (Dincă & Iliescu, 2008) and on an educational sample (Gavreliuc, Gavreliuc, & Cîmpean, 2009; Gavreliuc, 2016).

But these two models have been never applied together in the Romanian educational environment, with their traditional instruments (VSM94, SAS60).

By bringing together all these theoretical perspectives, our study points to the extent to which, in the Romanian educational environment, one can find the causal sources for its failures, both systemic and personal, which are *not* represented first and foremost by the scarcity of resources, but rather by a series of "mental inertia" found in assistential rhetoric such as "old mentalities", "communist waste", "conservatism",

“routines”, which would characterize school and its actors. For example, the Report of the Presidential Commission for Education describes the residual nature of behaviour and value patterns of many conservatives from the academic world, who are responsible for the “ineffective, irrelevant, unfair and of poor quality” nature of the Romanian education (Miclea et al, 2007, p. 7).

To this end, we will describe the profiles resulted from operating with all the afore-mentioned dimensions and examine them in terms of educational affiliation of subjects (pre-university vs. university) or generational specificity. We are also testing the role of this ‘mental inertia’ - operationalized by several cultural dimensions – in generating the evoked profiles.

## ***Methods***

### *Sample*

The study was conducted on a sample consisting of 522 subjects: 253 teachers from high schools and 269 academics from universities, from the humanities and social sciences areas, belonging to 7 secondary schools and high schools, and to 4 public universities, respectively. All the subjects selected for this purpose were from Timișoara, the most important city from the western part of Romania.

### *Instruments*

*The Social Axioms Survey (SAS60)* (Leung & Bond, 2004) measures generalized beliefs about people, social groups, social institution and social dynamics described in terms of axiomatic definitions or assessment of social environment. The specific instrument consisted of 60 items (ranked 1 to 5 on a Likert scale), grouped in 5 constructs that measured the level of agreement for each subject concerning: social

cynicism (a negative and manipulative view of human nature), social complexity (the diversity of choices in a concrete situation), reward for application (effort and knowledge invested lead to positive results), religiosity (the existence of supernatural forces and the beneficial functions of religious beliefs) and fate control (the life events are pre-determined). The higher the scores on each construct, the more strength of the degree of accepting those axiomatic beliefs. In this sample, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient varies between  $\alpha = .81$  (for fate control) to .90 (for social cynicism).

*The Values Survey Module 94 (VSM94)* (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) consists of 20 items (ranked 1 to 5 on a Likert scale), requiring also some additional factual information (gender, education, age, nationality) and providing 5 constructs: individualism-collectivism (the manner of using personal vs. collective resources in order to fulfil the identity needs), uncertainty avoidance (attitudes towards change), masculinity-femininity (attitudes focused on task vs. attitudes focused on relationships), power distance (attitudes between over-ordinate and sub-ordinate in a hierarchical network in organization) and long-short term perspective (attitudes towards developing the organizational / societal processes as organic ones or as conjectural ones). Usually, the scores are between 0 to 100 for each scale and the higher the score for each construct, the more prominent the specific profile in terms of individualism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, power distance, long term perspective. The reliability coefficient obtained were between  $\alpha = .64$  (for masculinity/femininity) to .73 (long-short term perspective).

*The Self-Determination Scale* (Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996) measures the overall attitude towards 'owning your life'. It consists of two sub-scales, each with five items: awareness of self and perceived choice. The two subscales can be used separately or combined, in order to give an overall score of self-determination. In this paper, the overall score of self-determination was used. For each item, subjects had a choice between two opposing statements (A, B) in connection with the aspects measured. The Likert scale from 1 to 5 indicated the degree to

which participants agree with the items. For example, if assertion A is completely true and assertion B is completely untrue, then the answer is assessed with 1; if both statements are true to the same degree, the answer is assessed with 3; if statement A is completely untrue and assertion B is completely true, the answer is assessed with 5. The global score of self-determination can oscillate between 0 (minimum) and 50 (maximum), with an average score of 30. The reliability coefficient obtained for the global scale was  $\alpha = .76$ .

*The Locus of Control Scale* (Rotter, 1966, 1975) evaluates the type of attribution (internal / external) and consists of 29 items, of which 23 are active items and 6 are neutral. For each item, subjects have to choose between two statements that describe an external or internal orientation. The total LC score is obtained by counting the number of external responses (minimum 0, maximum 23, the average scale is 11.5). In this sample, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .81$ .

*The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (Rosenberg, 1965) evaluates the explicit positive and negative attitudes toward self. The scale consists of 10 items (e.g., "I take a positive attitude toward myself") measured from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and has very good internal consistency,  $\alpha = .91$ . Higher scores indicate a high level of explicit self-esteem.

## **Results**

The results associated with the cultural dimension of Hofstede's model (power distance – PD, individualism-collectivism - I / C, masculinity-femininity - M / F, Uncertainty Avoidance - UA, long / short time perspectives - L / S TP) differ from other Romanian similar research, which worked with samples that have a different composition (national representative sample, or regional representative samples or groups of subjects consisting of managers), and are described in a comparative analysis in *Table 1*. Thus, there is a very high score on power distance

(PD = 78), which in terms of behavioural descriptors (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) expresses a strong mutual distrust between the organizational actors placed on different hierarchical positions.

*Table 1. Results compared with other relevant research in Romania / Balkans - cultural dimensions proposed by Geert Hofstede – conventional test scores on VSM94*

Referential research / cultural dimensions	PD	I/C	M/F	UA	L/S TP
Gavreliuc, Gavreliuc, (this paper) - sample consisting of teachers (humanities, social and political sciences area) – Romania, 522 subjects	78	36	34	85	23
Gavreliuc (2011), regional representative sample, Western Region - Romania, 1058 subjects	51	50	25	69	34
Spector, Cooper, Sanchez, et al. (2001), national sample, Romania, 455 subjects,	26	47	23	50	55
Luca (2005), representative national sample, Romania, 1076 subjects	29	49	39	61	42
Romania - G. Hofstede estimates	90	30	42	90	-
Bulgaria - G. Hofstede estimates	70	30	40	85	-
Balkans - Hofstede estimates	76	27	21	88	-

Note: PD – power distance, I/C – individualism-collectivism, M/F-masculinity/femininity, UA – uncertainty avoidance, L/S TP – long/short term perspective.

The specific scores on this dimension have been closer to the global assessments of G. Hofstede (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), but the results obtained on the Romanian samples (Spector, Cooper, Sanchez et al., 2001, Luca, 2005; Gavreliuc, 2016) show that the distance from power was significantly lower. If the research previously cited evoked *relational modernization* in the sense of taking over an organizational and interpersonal hierarchical model on a Western pattern, the trend in our study illustrates an important return on the attitudinal level toward *non-partnership patterns*, characterized by aggression, mutual mistrust, frustration and disengagement. Moreover, the group portrait sample resulting from the application of SAS60 shows - especially if you compare it with other national samples obtained from similar cultural areas - has significantly higher scores than those of the overwhelming majority of the national samples (Leung & Bond, 2008). - See *Table 2*.

*Table 2 Cultural dimensions of the social axioms model*

Dimensions of the social axioms model (n = 522)	Minimum score	Maximum score	M	SD
Social cynicism	1.76	4.65	3.2970	.43363
Reward for application	1.75	4.83	3.8064	.44364
Social complexity	2.08	4.33	3.4347	.29657
Fate control	1.00	4.57	2.6902	.57815
Religiosity	1.29	5.00	3.2750	.64114

The score obtained on the most problematic dimension of the social axioms model (social cynicism = 3.30), as the Romanian sample consists of teachers and academics, is placed in the vicinity of countries like those in the Far East (China - 3.03, Hong Kong - 3.13, India - 3.04) or the Islamic area (Pakistan - 3.29) (Bond & Leung 2018). Such a result shows striking duplicitous identity strategies which, beyond the rhetoric honourable interpersonal honest openness, works in an opportunistic

and instrumental way (using it on the “other” as a means to achieve their own goals). Such cynicism of interpersonal logic in an educational environment testifies to an assimilation attitudes pattern deeply rooted in Romanian society, which relies on a lack of social capital (mainly characterized by very low interpersonal and generalized trust) (Sandu, 2003; Gavreliuc, 2011). With regard to personal autonomy, the results are distributed as follows, stabilizing at a low level for all the dimensions assessed (see Table 3).

*Table 3. Personal autonomy of teachers and academics*

Scale (n=522)	M	SD
Self-awareness	11.5920	4.96283
Perceived choice	12.0613	4.32065
Self-determination	23.6533	6.71524
Self-esteem	21.0824	4.30628
Locus of control	11.9521	3.27610

Moreover, other specific scores were also similar to previous studies, although the samples consisted of all classes of people (not just teachers and academics) (Gavreliuc, 2016). The entire period of recent years - especially after 2008, marked by the deepening of the economic crisis - was accompanied by a continuous deterioration of the working conditions, of the salary level and of the stability of teachers and academics, and the fact that inference interfered with “the control people hold over their own lives” and the set of emotions that accompany them (anxiety, restlessness, insecurity, disappointment, etc.) articulates a trend that is confirmed by other cross-cultural studies (Verschuur, Maric, & Spinhoven, 2010).



## ***Discussion***

### *Profiles Comparison Between the Type of Organizational Membership (Pre-University vs. University)*

A similar analysis performed on the identity portrait of teachers according to their membership to the pre-university or the university environment completes the “status quo” picture in schools, outlining the assumed social identities, especially in the register of cultural dimensions. No fewer than six dimensions produce significantly different scores depending on the insertion of subjects in the pre-university, or the university educational context (locus of control - LC, power distance - DP, individualism-collectivism - I / C, social cynicism - SC, reward for application - RA, religiosity - R), which are statistically significant, and one is at the limit of significance (fate control - FC). Of the seven dimensions, at least five produced unexpected differences (PD, SC, AR, FC, R), according to whether the subjects are in an environment that requires the purchase of a symbolic capital (prestige, educational capital, capital and opportunities and last, but not least, of all the material capital) namely a richer result in the university than in the pre-university context. Thus, the Hofstede model establishes that those working in the pre-university field are involved in hierarchical relations based more on partnership and cooperation than those working in universities, with a statistically significantly lower score on distance towards power ( $t(520) = -4.583, p < 0.001$ ). This result suggests an assimilation attitude pattern with a touch of the local educational environment: the more authoritarian and non-partnership they are, the more the subjects “climb” on the ladder of social prestige. The features depicted above are strengthened by the statistically significantly higher scores in social cynicism for academics, than for

those of the pre-university environment ( $t(520) = -2.213, p = 0.027$ ), with a very high average for both samples anyway, significantly higher than the national cultures of most large-scale cross-cultural research studies coordinated by Michael Harris Bond and Kwok Leung (2018).

### *Profiles Comparison Between Generational Belonging. The Role of Cultural Dimensions in Generating a Problematic Profile*

We were also interested in diversifying the description of the Romanian educational context through an intergenerational analysis. The diagnosis performed on organizational areas in Romania in what concerns cultural dimensions indicates high scores for power distance, collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, femininity and short term orientation (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). After this primary analysis already described in a previous section, we have tried to determine which generational cohorts are more meaningfully described by these tendencies. We will also aim to assess the *thesis of relational modernization* in Romanian educational organizations, in the sense of taking over an organizational and interpersonal hierarchical model following a Western pattern. Our research rather evokes a notable return on the attitudinal level towards *non-partnership patterns*, characterized by aggression, mutual mistrust, frustration and disengagement.

One-way ANOVAs with cohorts as an independent variable found statistically significant intergenerational differences regarding locus of control, power distance, social cynicism, social complexity, fate control and religiosity, as illustrated in *Table 4*.

The first distinction is registered on locus of control ( $F=2.308, p=0.05$ ). Significant statistical differences are observed between cohorts (age 18-29) and (age 40-49), in a counterintuitive way: younger teachers are more externalists than the older ones, illustrating an opposite trend in comparison to the western environments (Chak & Leung, 2004; Bors & Roe, 2006). The fact attests that after two decades of post-communism,

the phenomenon of learned helplessness is extremely wide-spread, contaminating the young cohorts (Gherasim, 2011).

In the register of cultural dimensions from G. Hofstede's model, only power distance is distributed significantly different between cohorts ( $F=8.142$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Thus, even if the global score of the power distance index is high ( $M=78.06$ ,  $SD=24.01$ ), the score is higher for the younger cohorts. Seen as a variable associated with interpersonal and institutional authoritarianism (Smith et al., 2005), pronounced high scores on power distance indicate the everyday practices from school, based on symbolic force, dogmatism and obedience, as generalized symptoms. Therefore, these kinds of practices become routine strategies in the hierarchical relationships in the Romanian educational environment. The difference between the youngest cohort (age 18-29) and the middle-aged one (age 40-49) is more than 16 conventional points on the PD index, suggesting that the post-communist period has consolidated the authoritarian patterns acquired in communism.

Likewise, the most problematic social identity proved to belong to the the youngest cohort, as the main dimension of the social axioms model – social cynicism – is, statistically, significantly higher than the specific scores for the cohorts with a more consolidated experience in communism, especially in comparison to the cohorts aged 40 to 49. This outcome indicates a similar tendency with previous research (Gavreliuc, Cimpean, & Gavreliuc, 2009), in which the Romanian younger social strata were more predisposed to an un-honest generalized way of thinking and acting in their interpersonal relationships, as a *functional* way of solving their own tasks. The mere fact that social cynicism activates an interpersonal logic in an educational environment testifies to an assimilation of an implicit cognition pattern deeply rooted in the Romanian society, which relies on a lack of social capital, mainly represented by a deficient interpersonal and generalized trust (Sandu, 2003; Gavreliuc & Gavreliuc, 2018).

Regarding the social complexity dimension, we found significant statistic inter-categorical differences, ( $F=6.610$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) with the

younger cohort proving more intense in acquiring an opportunist attitudinal pattern, with a more pronounced behavioural flexibility than the older cohort (60+ years). This outcome is similar to results obtained on samples from the Islamic area, where the experience of inhibiting behaviour along with the ageing process is demonstrated (Joshani, Afshari, & Rastegar, 2010).

*Table 4 Intergenerational Comparison of attributional patterns and cultural dimensions (social axioms and Hofstede's dimensions) (One-Way ANOVAs)*

		Generation al	Stratum			
Dimens ions	G(18-29) M(SD)	G(30-39) M(SD)	G(40-49) M(DS)	G(50-59) M(SD)	G(+60) M(SD)	F-values
LOC	12.7692b (3.06259)	12.0884ab (3.35752)	11.5699a (3.30241)	11.6351ab (3.40255)	11.9583ab (11.9583)	2.308*
PD	89.89b (18.211)	78.78ab (23.819)	73.60a (24.773)	74.19a (24.579)	75.21ab (23.242)	8.142**
SCnS	3.5734c (0.38148)	3.4018b (0.42826)	3.1414a (0.40122)	3.1335a (0.36422)	3.3186abc (0.36422)	23.473**
SCx	3.5403d (0.29010)	3.4626abcd (0.26874)	3.3665ab (0.30772)	3.4516abcd (0.28835)	3.3403a (0.28649)	6.610**
FC	2.8823c (0.48121)	2.7833bc (0.58266)	2.5476a (0.58061)	2.6197ab (0.58318)	2.7143abc (0.58067)	6.874**
R	3.5196b (0.54649)	3.2896ab (0.05222)	3.1767a (0.04712)	3.1680a (0.07331)	3.3512ab (0.16518)	5.187**

Note: LOC = locus of control, PD = power distance, SCnS = social cynicism, SCx = social complexity, FC = fate control, R = religiosity.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ . Notes:  $df = 2, 1478$ . Means with same letters do not differ significantly.

Fate control, as a dependent variable, generates intergenerational statistical differences ( $F=6.874$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), describing a portrait characterized by the following tendency: “the younger you are, the more fatalist you are”. The most balanced subjects are the mature ones (aged 40-49 and 50-59), that opt in favour of more autonomous axiomatic

definitions of social life and its dynamics, in contradiction with other studies in which youth is associated with trust in their own forces and optimistic visions about the future and control of their own life (Zhou, Leung, & Bond, 2009).

The analysis of religiosity describes global significant statistic differences between cohorts ( $F=5.187$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), in which the younger cohorts are more religiously involved in interpreting their own lives, with more relevant reference points associated to supernatural factors, than the mature cohorts (aged 40-49 and 50-59). This outcome could be explained by the dominant socialization type acquired in communism, which was more restrictive in the area of religious practices, and, therefore, is more influent on the mature cohorts. At the same time, the recrudescence of an implicit religious semantics in explaining social dynamics for the younger generation should also be underlined.

All the previously-mentioned tendencies are further supported by the explanatory mechanism provided by hierarchical regressions, which explains in a significant quantum, predicted by means of several independent variables integrated in our research, some problematic scores identified before (i.e., low level of self-determination or high level of power distance). Thus, as a last step of the statistical analysis, self-esteem, locus of control, uncertainty avoidance and long-short time perspective become very good predictors for a very large amount of variance of self-determination ( $R^2=0.632$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). At the same time, global self-determination, self-esteem, locus of control, social cynicism, religiosity and fate control are good predictors together for almost 20% of variance of power distance ( $R^2=0.198$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Our outcomes prove the significant impact of cultural dimensions (from Hofstede's model or from the social axioms model) in predicting this already described symptomatology, because when we are adding the cultural dimensions in the explanatory model, we are increasing significantly the power of model prediction.

## ***Conclusions***

In conclusion, we identified a younger generation with a problematic profile (highest scores for power distance, social cynicism, fate control and religiosity) and an externalist attributional style, describing a controversial social portrait, different from the majority outlined by previous studies in this area. All these trends suggest the presence of a truly insightful and inertial process of contamination at the level of social cognition for the Romanian younger social strata, implicitly transferred via the older cohort socialized in communism. Thus, the axiomatic definition of social dynamics and social involvement is more fatalistic and duplicitous, even if the younger ones are expected to be more self – determined and open.

This observation is more alarming because the tendency is proven to be active in a social environment (represented by education) which is traditionally associated with promoting social responsibility and communitarian involvement. From our research, we can observe how young people are not “what they seem” to be, and that they are precariously integrated into the role of change agents, the vectors of change in mentality binding (Gavreliuc, 2011). For that reason, beyond appearances (institutional acquisition and behavioural changes), the societal change in Romania performed through a democratic pattern becomes a problematic one as well, and the *thesis of relational modernization* in Romanian educational organizations is refuted.

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