STUDENTS' OPINIONS ON THE DISCRIMINATION RISK OF DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

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Abstract: The issue of social discrimination (e.g. exclusion, social injustice, labeling, etc.) continues to affect the Romanian society, despite the consistent efforts made in recent decades. According to the European citizenship philosophy, the new generation must be equipped with appropriate social skills, required for an inclusive society, the higher education sector having a critical role in this area. The purpose of our study is to identify students' opinions and attitudes regarding discrimination risks of disadvantaged groups, according to ethnical/racial criteria, age or sexual orientation. The study sample included 140 students from the "Ovidius" University of Constanta, aged between 19 and 37 years old (both women and men), 70 from humanities faculties and 70 from applied sciences and mathematics. Our research aims to investigate the correlations that exist between the risk of discrimination and certain variables such as age, sex, year of study and the field of competence. Our results confirm to a great extent prior research findings to which we have reviewed in the paper.

Keywords- discrimination, minorities, students, opinions

Introduction

In our previous research (Giurgiu, Marica, Ionescu, 2015), we emphasized the necessity of introducing a framework for the implementation of a moral values

system and pro-social behaviors, integrated in the category of transversal competencies, in the academic curricula of students. Without these general-human oriented attitudes, the graduate (from non-humanistic or humanistic fields) cannot be a complete citizen, representative of a contemporary European space, so open to diversity and so generous-integrative for everyone. In this study we concluded that students who chose to engage professionally and personally in humanities (Social Work, Law, History and Political Science, Humanities, Psychology, and Theology) are more open to human values, their profiles playing an important role as a differentiation element for the attitudinal outcomes.

Our research also shows that female students are generally more tolerant than male students in terms of social discrimination, especially regarding the issue of homosexuality, confirming the wider hypothesis regarding the higher tolerance of women relative to men. On the other hand, the study shows that students from humanities are generally more open to the minorities issue and have greater respect for their rights as compared to their colleagues from sciences or engineering. One of our proposals was to include in the academic curricula topics seeking moral and civic education of future specialists from non-humanistic fields in order to induce emotional, attitudinal and subsequent behavioral changes. A minimal intervention in this direction could be the implementation of the discipline Ethics and Deontology in the general curricula, in order to increase awareness among students of the moral bases of relating to others, given the social and professional norms. We also highlighted the usefulness of voluntary activities among students (volunteerism and pro-social behaviors, supported by offering bonuses and extra credits for the participants).

In Europe, as well as throughout the world, researchers are concerned with the moral-civic profile of young people who are becoming the leaders and the makers of the modern world. For example, research on conflicting values of the past and present in traditional African societies influenced by the Western world emphasizes that values have continued to change to suit a changing world which has brought about an increased wave of moral decadence and moral laxity (Ime, UyanGA, 2014). Some moral values of the past include: Truthfulness, Respect, Tolerance and Cooperation, Hard work and Functionalism, Respect for human life and Dignity of persons, etc. Conversely, values of the present unfortunately include dishonesty, disrespect,

intolerance and lack of cooperation, profit oriented relationships, abuse of human dignity, loss of pride in hard work by adopting the philosophy that "the end justifies the means." Modern societies are experiencing the wave of corruption driven by the "get rich quick syndrome" (Ime, UyanGA, 2014). The authors however conclude that "still, the world celebrates men and women of great values who held on and continue to hold on to values that are undeniable and true, that stand out for their values, even in the face of persistent danger (e.g., Nelson Mandela or Malala Yousafzai) … Being a total man with knowledge, competence (skills) and right attitudes can leave lasting legacies for the future of any society. Moral values of the past can still be practiced by youths in present day societies."

In the present paper, we have deepened the previous analysis and refined it by focusing on establishing the statistical correlations between the perceived risk of discrimination on ethnic/racial, age, or sexual orientation criteria on the one hand, and the age of the respondents, year of study and the studied profile on the other hand.

Main issues and supporting research in the field
Student's attitude towards ethnic minorities

The issue of social integration of the Roma population is not new, and it is far from being solved at the level of the Romanian society. Although the Dobrogea region (including Constanta County) is considered to be one of the areas of multiethnicity, diversity and multiculturalism, it is useful to measure the social perception of youths towards the Roma population enrolled in the educational process, in order to boost the social inclusion policies and to monitor the integration measures carried out by the authorities through governmental strategies (Romanian Government Strategy, 2014) and to reduce the educational disparity between Roma and Romanians, which is often insurmountable. The Barometer of Roma Inclusion (Badescu and al., 2007), by the Open Society Foundation (2007), shows that in 2000 the World Bank estimated for Romania annual productivity losses of 887 million Euros due to exclusion of the Roma population.

In a previous paper (Marica, Giurgiu, Enache, 2017), we mentioned that only a few respondents of our group of 40 Roma parents recall the risk of discrimination against their children in school, and would like teachers to take action in this regard. As a result of our survey, the idea that the situation of the Roma is largely explained by their attitude towards education is rather a convenient stereotype, meant to cover deeper causes related to poverty, marginalization, and historical discrimination. It is nevertheless possible that the affirmative policies of the last period, as well as the multiple educational projects, have altered the perception of the Roma, especially of the younger

ones and the ones with an increased level of education. Only 7 respondents (out of 40) have formulated more elaborate responses, that predict the positive effects of a changing mentality ("We want for Roma families another perspective on life, opening windows to the world, access to information, a different entourage, the status of a modern and integrated European citizen," etc.). They also expressed the hope that a positive change in the attitudes of the majority population will occur in time, so as to reach: "the development of the communication and information capacities, respect among the citizens"; "Increasing the chances of being a citizen included in a civilized, modern and European society, developing positive attitudes towards life; intellectual development; support in realizing each individual's dreams; the ability to gain respect, a good name and fame, etc."

Another study that we conducted in 2016 on a sample that included 125 male and female students explored young people's perceptions of new relationship traits, regarding the diversity and the mixed couples. In this research (Giurgiu, Girip, 2016), we found that as a result of more open communication and interactions of Romanians with multiethnic societies through work and study, young people exhibit tolerance and preference for a life in a multicultural couple. The opinions of the respondents have been distributed around the possibility of partnering with a person from a different ethnic group than theirs: about 27% of students admit that "they would struggle very much to accept" this option, 15% of them said that "they might accept this type of diversity in a couple only for certain ethnic groups," while a significant 44% of students indicated that "they will unconditionally accept the idea of a mixed marriage." These findings seem to highlight the fact that the respondents are open to diversity as they are "going through a liberalization process which tends to discard traditional values" (Mardare, 2016), and confirming our hypothesis regarding the acceptance of a life partner who belongs to a different ethnic and/or religious group. We did not find significant differences in how male and female perceive and accept diversity in a couple.

Other researches found that family environments are major predictors of cognitive and socio-emotional skills of the young generation, however, outcomes are not predetermined. Castiglioni et.all discusses some of the challenges associated with the identification of the specific role of family ties in Romania, before and after the comunism era. In these author´s view, the challenges are related to the following: 1) a shift of paradigm regarding family ties; 2) changes in living arrangements and union formation such as cohabitations and births out of wedlock; 3) the impact of the second demographic transition in Romania (e.g. earlier departure from the nuclear family, atractiveness of the independent living, economic migration etc.); 4)

the decline of the predictability and standardised paths of life a current trend in Romania (Castiglioni, Hărăguş, Faludi, Hărăguş, 2016).

Students' perceptions of the involvement of the youth in public life

Concerning involvement of young people in social and political life, a Belgian panel study developed in 2008 stated that "social and political participation of the youth is beneficial to people, society and democracy in general. In the literature, mainly young people are blamed for their low levels of political participation" (Quintelier, 2008). The author of the research focused on a obvious decline in conventional participation, especially among young people, expressing worries about their levels of involvement and attempted to identify solutions and provide means to reinforce political participation among young Belgian citizens. Other studies show that even young people are more critical of the democratic performance of European countries, but disillusionment with politics did not necessarily lead to a rise in political participation (Kiisel, Leppik, Seppel,2015) . Results of this research seem to suggest that social and political participation of the youth in Europe is related to both strong optimism and strong criticism, and this tendency was a bit less differentiating among the young than among the adult group.

Students' opinions on elderly people

Statistical data starting from 2010 show a significant increase in the average human lifespan and an extension of old age. Negative stereotypes of aging affect not only the senior citizens' experience of aging, but also young people's perception of it, influencing their attitude to older people. It would seem that the negative perception of seniors is the basis of unsympathetic attitudes toward older people and discrimination against them, the so called ageism. The main aim of this thesis was to become familiar with the opinions submitted by respondents regarding aging and old age, health problems connected with aging and preferred health behaviors (Cybulski, Krajewska-Kułak, Jamiolkowski, 2015). Another study conducted in Poland by the Center for Public Opinion Research (Public Opinion Research Center, 2009) on a group of 1022 respondents, found that only 13% of them were certain that the elderly in Poland are respected in society and half of them had a reserved opinion on this subject. Most junior high-school students (48.5%), as well as most university students (71.0%), were of the opinion that it is easier to go through old age in the countries of Western Europe than in Poland or other Eastern European countries.

Students' perception of sexual minorities

The more or less manifest conflicts between straight and gay young

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people, as well as the risk of discrimination and harassment to which the latter are exposed, is an acute and widespread problem in educational environments and beyond. A study conducted in Canada in 2014 by E. Saewyc shows that it is possible to effectively intervene through anti-homophobic and anti-bullying policies among adolescents in schools (through a pilot experiment on prevention), so that the risk of discrimination of gay youths—and consequently the number of attempted suicides, depressions and other forms of alienation (mental health problems) manifested among them—could decrease significantly. Stigmatization, exclusion and isolation of sexual minorities can therefore be diminished by increasing tolerance and acceptance among heterosexual youths, which transforms these intervention styles into good practice models for the academic environment, everywhere (Saewyc and al. 2014).

Method
Hypothesis
We expect that, as students emotionally and socially mature, they become less prone to discrimination. Maturity may naturally come with age, or be a consequence of other factors that may be influenced by age (e.g., the number of social experiences occasioned by, e.g., employment, living in a campus, etc.). Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. Age is negatively related to (a) racial/ethnic discrimination, (b) age discrimination, and (c) sexual orientation discrimination.

One potential variable that may be confounded with age is the progress through the years of study. It is possible that, in the case of university students, interactions with peers and professors potentially representing various races or ethnicities, cultures, religions, and perhaps more than one age group or sexual orientation, etc., gradually increase their level of tolerance and their acceptance of diversity. This leads us to posit:

Hypothesis 2. Year of study is negatively related to (a) racial/ethnic discrimination, (b) age discrimination, and (c) sexual orientation discrimination after controlling for age.

We also expect the academic curricula to influence students' opinions, values, beliefs, etc. Therefore, we predict the following:

Hypothesis 3. Students from humanities are less inclined than students specializing in non-humanistic fields to discriminate others on grounds of (a) race/ethnicity, (b) age, and (c) sexual orientation.

Hypothesis 4. Specialization moderates the relationship between year of study and (a) racial/ethnic discrimination, (b) age discrimination, and (c) sexual orientation discrimination, such that the relationship is significant only

for humanists.
Participants

Data gathered for this research were part of a larger study (Giurgiu, Marica, Ionescu, 2015). One hundred and forty undergraduate students, 70 from humanities (Social Work, Law, History and Political Science, Humanities, Psychology and Theology) and 70 from applied sciences and mathematics (Automotive Engineering, Electromechanical Engineering, Electronics, Geography of Tourism, Horticulture, Mechanical Engineering, Marketing, Mathematics and Computer Science) completed our survey. The participants were 50% male and their average age was 21 years (SD = 4).

Instruments

Discrimination was assessed using a questionnaire we developed by selecting and adapting questions from a survey conducted by The Gallup Organization Romania in 2003, as cited in (Centrul de Resurse Juridice, 2015). Five items measured racial/ethnic discrimination, four items measured age discrimination, and five items were used to assess sexual orientation discrimination (see Appendix). The questions were assigned Likert scale response formats ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree/To a very small extent/Never to 5 = Strongly agree/To a very large extent/Always.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender	.50	.50						
2. Age	21.49	4.31	-0.14					
3.Specialization	.49	.50	0.65***	-0.05				
4. Year of study	1.88	.84	-0.15	0.22**	-0.08			
5. Racial/ Ethnic discrimination	3.27	.60	-0.21*	-0.15	-0.3***	-0.10		
6. Age discrimination	3.45	.49	0.07	-0.29***	0.04	-0.02	0.14	
7. Sexual orientation discrimination	2.59	.51	-0.16	0.03	-0.15	-0.10	0.07	-0.11

a. N = 140. Gender was coded 1 for female and 0 for male. Specialization was coded 1 for humanistic and 0 for non-humanistic.

b. * p < .05. ** p < .01.

In order to test our hypotheses, we conducted a set of hierarchical

regression analyses. For each of the three types of discrimination assessed, we entered gender as a control variable and age in the first step, year of study and specialization in the second step, and the interaction of the latter two in the final step. Results are presented in Table II.

Supporting Hypotheses 1a and 1b, age had a significant effect on racial/ethnical discrimination ($p < .05$) and age discrimination ($p < .01$), respectively. Of note, age remained significant throughout the steps of the regression analysis: though it dropped to a marginal value of $p < .10$ in the last step as a predictor of racial/ethnical discrimination, its strong significance in predicting age discrimination was entirely unaffected by including the other predictors in the regression equation. However, the influence of age on sexual orientation discrimination (Hypotheses 1c) was not confirmed.

No support was found for Hypothesis 2, as the year of study did not have a significant effect on any of the types of discrimination in the presence of age as a predictor.

Hypothesis 3, which stated that humanists are more tolerant than students specializing in non-humanistic fields, was confirmed, at $p < .05$, only for race/ethnicity (3a).

As for Hypothesis 4, results indeed showed a significant moderating effect of specialization on the relationship between year of study and age discrimination ($p < .05$), with the interaction term adding 4% to the explained variance in age discrimination. Further examination of the differentiated relationship revealed that, while the effect of year of study was nonsignificant in the subsample of humanists, the relationship was positive and significant ($p < .05$) in the subsample of students specializing in non-humanistic fields. Fig. 1 illustrates the increase in age discrimination with year of study for students in non-humanistic fields, and the decrease (though nonsignificant) for humanists. We mention that we controlled for gender and age in both groups, and year of study explained an additional 6% of the variation in age discrimination for students pursuing a career in a non-humanistic field.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression analysis result

Independent variables	Racial/Ethnical discrimination			Age discrimination			Sexual orientation discrimination		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Gender	-.29*	-.09	-.06	.02	.06	.11	-.16	-.12	-.12
Age	-.03*	-.03*	-.02†	-.03**	-.03**	-.03**	.00	.01	.01
Year of study		-.04	.01		.04	.13†		-.07	-.07
Specialization		-.31*	-.09		-.04	.35		-.09	-.10
Year of study			-.13			-.22*			.01

Independent variables	Racial/Ethnical discrimination			Age discrimination			Sexual orientation discrimination		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Specialization									
R^2	.10	.14	.15	.09	.09	.13	.03	.04	.04
ΔR^2	.10	.04	.01	.09	.00	.04	.03	.01	.00
ΔF	5.70**	2.54†	.92	5.23**	.34	4.22*	1.47	.95	.00
Adjusted R^2	.08	.11	.10	.07	.06	.09	.01	.01	.00
F	5.70**	4.20**	3.54**	5.23**	2.75*	3.11*	1.47	1.21	.96

a. N = 140. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Gender was coded 1 for female and 0 for male. Specialization was coded 1 for humanistic and 0 for non-humanistic.

b. † $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Discussions

Overall, partial support was found for the hypotheses of the present research. As expected, age was found to reduce racial/ethnical discrimination, and, to an even greater degree—age discrimination. However, it failed to predict sexual orientation discrimination. This suggests that, regarding some aspects—but not all of them—people tend to grow more tolerant with age.

Unfortunately, though the current study found support for an association between students' choice for humanistic specializations and a reduced proneness to racial/ethnical discrimination, covering the curricula did not seem to reduce any kind of discrimination. Moreover, students specializing in non-humanistic fields appeared to grow more intolerant as they advanced in their studies. It may be that intolerant students share their negative attitudes towards the elderly with their colleagues, who, in turn, tend to adopt the same attitudes in order to consolidate their status in a social context characterized by these low levels of acceptance. A student who expresses concern, respect, etc. towards the elderly may fear mockery by his or her peers for what they perceive as weakness, or, more generally, maladaptive behavior. Nevertheless, more research—preferably longitudinal in design, and including more potential predictors—is clearly needed to provide a more thorough understanding of these phenomena.

It may be important to emphasize that our results showed that none of the predictor variables included in the study (age, year of study, specialization, and the interaction of the latter two) had a significant impact on sexual orientation discrimination. In search of relevant variables, future research should probably focus on other areas, such as family, religion, mass-media, etc.
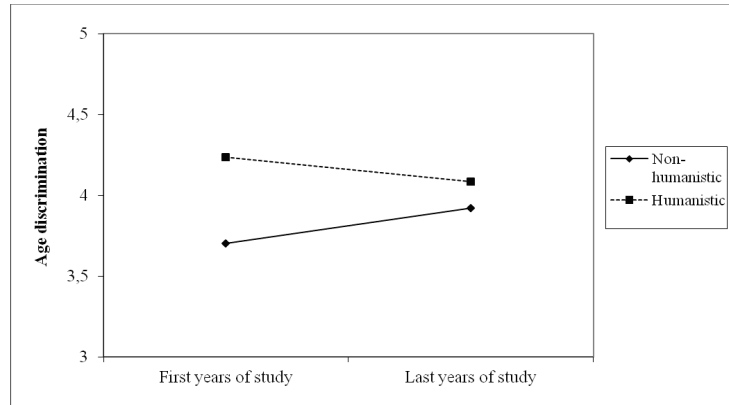
Figure 1. Moderating effect of specialization on the year of study-age
discrimination relationship

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Questionnaire items:

Ethnical/Racial discrimination

I often use the word "gipsy" instead of "Roma."

I think (or say to family or friends) that most Roma are criminals (thieves, robbers), beggars, or lazy.

I think that it was because of them that Romania's international image was compromised.

I agree with policies to support Roma. (Reverse scored)

I find marriages between Romanians and foreigners acceptable. (Reverse scored)

Age discrimination

I think it's because of the young people's lack of involvement in social life that things go bad in Romania.

I think retirees are a drag to society.

I think our society has enough respect for retirees.

I think our society does enough for young people.

Sexual orientation discrimination

I agree that homosexuality is a disease.

I think the chances of a homosexual to be a pedophile are much higher than for a heterosexual.

I think that homosexuality is a threat to society.

I believe that gay marriage should be accepted.

I believe that gays should have the right to adopt a child.