

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES AND STUDENTS' SOCIAL DISTANCE TOWARD MEMBERS OF NATIONAL MINORITIES

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Abstract: The cultural diversity, as well as more and more intensive intercultural encounters are significant features of modern societies. Therefore, intercultural competences are more and more recognized as an important aspect of establishing quality international relationships. The aim of this research is the examination of intercultural competences of students as well as the level of the social distance to Romani people, Bosniaks, and Albanians in order to consider to which extent openness to cultural diversity is expressed through readiness to be involved in direct social relationships. The research was conducted in 2022/2023 school year on an appropriate and purposive sample of 236 Bachelor students at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Nis. Data were collected by the survey method, using a structured questionnaire. Intercultural competences are organized through three dimensions: knowledge, skills and attitudes. Social distance was measured by the modified Bogardus scale, adapted to the types of social relationships relevant to student population. The results show that students have relatively developed intercultural competences, but their individual dimensions are not displayed uniformly. Whereas skills and attitudes are mostly interculturally oriented, the results of knowledge dimension reveal more visible inconsistencies. Simultaneously, differences in the levels of social distance to national minorities were shown, with the greatest shown to Albanians, and the lowest to Bosniaks. The findings indicate a need to analyze the openness to cultural diversity in the context of particular forms of closeness. These findings can be seen as an addition to a further empirical discussion on the content, structure and the ways of measuring intercultural competences.

Keywords: *intercultural competences; social distance; cultural diversity; national minorities; intergroup relationships.*

Field: Social Sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural diversity is one of the significant features of contemporary societies and their particularity is not only in the very presence of different cultures, which characterized pre-modern societies, too, but also in the fact that cultural diversity has become the subject of public and political regulation, as well as the struggle of different groups for the recognition, equality and the right to cultural identity (Petković, 2020; Mesić, 2006). Thus, the intensification of intercultural interactions imposes a need for sociological research of intercultural competences (Savić, 2011). Intercultural competences are defined in different ways by different authors, but the most common elements comprise knowledge, skills and attitudes which enable an adequate and efficient intercultural interaction (UNESCO, 2013; Deardorff, 2009, as cited in Deardorff, 2020). In the research this article is based on, intercultural competences are referred to as three interconnected dimensions – knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The significance of thus interpreted intercultural competences is particularly obvious in multiethnic and multicultural societies like Serbia. In Serbia, beside the majority population, there are numerous national minorities with their own cultural, linguistic and identity particularities. According to the 2022 Population census, Serbia is a heterogeneous society in which there are numerous national minorities, predominantly Hungarian, Bosniak, Romani, Albanian, Slovaks and Croats (RZS, 2023). However, the presence of cultural and ethnic diversity within the same society by itself does not imply the same level of social acceptance. That is the reason why the issue of intercultural relationships cannot be reduced to accepting particularities only declaratively, but it also requires that the ways it is expressed in particular social relationships are considered.

In that sense, the concept of social distance enables to refer to the acceptance of the members of other ethnic groups through different levels of social closeness. Bogardus's Social Distance Scale is based on the hypothesis that the acceptance of a certain social group can vary depending on the level of closeness which an individual is ready to establish with its members (Bogardus, 1947). Thus, the difference between a general acceptance of cultural diversity and readiness to establish direct social relationships is a relevant sociological issue, especially in the context of ethnic and culturally heterogeneous societies.

Taking the above-mentioned into consideration, the subject of this research is students' intercultural competences and the social distance which students show toward members of different national minorities.

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The aim of this paper is to consider students' intercultural competences through the dimensions of knowledge, skills and attitudes, as well as the level of the social distance to the members of different national minorities in order to investigate to what extent the openness to cultural diversity is expressed through the readiness for direct intergroup relationships.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The empirical data on which this article is based were collected during the research conducted while working on the master paper called Intercultural Competences of Faculty of Philosophy, University of Nis, during the 2022/2023 school year (Stojanović, 2023). The survey was carried out online, using a convenient and purposive sample of 236 OAS students of the Faculty of Philosophy in Nis. The structure was female oriented, mostly involving first year students. Most subjects were born and lived in the city, and most of their parents finished a four-year-long high school. The data were collected by a survey, using a structured questionnaire. The intercultural competences were operated through three dimensions – knowledge, skills and attitudes. Knowledge was estimated through claims about a general cultural context in the world and in Serbia, as well as specific cultural features and cultural heritage of Romani people, Albanians and Bosniaks, chosen as relevant examples of cultural, linguistic and religious diversity in the regional context in which the subjects lived and worked, with the subjects estimating their accuracy. Skills were operated through claims which illustrated different linguistic, communication, digital and other competences relevant for intercultural interactions, and the subjects estimated to what extent certain claims were related to their own competences, while attitudes were examined through claims related to the concept of multicultural communities and the attitude toward the other and different. The social distance to Romani, Albanian and Bosniak people was measured by a modified Bogardus scale. The scale involved seven forms of social relationships, from accepting the coexistence in the same country to accepting a marital, that is emotional relationship, where the subjects were asked to accept or decline any offered relationship.

3. RESULTS

Regarding the dimension of knowledge within intercultural competences, the results showed that students, in the main, had more knowledge about the general, cultural-heterogeneous character of contemporary societies than about particular national minorities which were the part of the social and cultural context of Serbia (Table 1). The results showed that more than 70% of the subjects correctly recognized the cultural heterogeneity as a feature of contemporary societies, the multi-cultural character of Serbia, and the existence of the legal regulations of the rights of national minorities. However, when it is about more concrete areas of enforcing rights, almost the third of the subjects (34.4%) stated that members of national minorities did not have the right to express their cultural uniqueness publicly by their language, religion, tradition and other means of cultural expression.

Table 1: Knowledge dimension (Responses in %)

	Statement	YES	NO
General knowledge	Contemporary states are generally ethnically and culturally homogeneous.	23.7	76.3
	Serbia is a multicultural state.	70.8	29.2
	The rights of national minorities in Serbia are guaranteed by the Constitution and laws.	79.7	20.3
	Members of national minorities in Serbia do not have the right to express their cultural distinctiveness in the public sphere/space (through language, religion, traditions, etc.), but only in private.	34.3	65.7
Romani	Child marriages are exclusively a characteristic of the Romani people.	38.1	61.9
Bosniaks	In areas with the highest proportion of <u>Bosniaks</u> in Serbia, regular education in the Bosnian language is available.	51.7	48.3
	Traditional Roma music is known for <u>sevdalinka</u> songs, emotional songs expressing sadness, love, and nostalgia.	74.6	25.4
Albanians	Religious Albanians are of the Islamic faith.	66.1	33.9

Source: Author's elaboration based on Stojanović (2023, pp. 47-50)

Note: Knowledge of each national minority was assessed through four statements. The table presents the statements whose results were statistically significant and are included to illustrate particular aspects of the participants' (lack of) knowledge about the characteristics of the examined national

minorities. The presented results do not constitute a composite measure of knowledge about a given minority.

The answers to the questions referring to the concrete national minorities – Romani, Bosniak and Albanian people, that is their cultural, linguistic, religious and historical characteristics, were not uniform. When it is about Romani people, about three quarters of the subjects (75.8%), showed the understanding of the word "Romani", while more than a half (56.8%) recognized the importance of the standardization of the Romani language for connecting Romani communities all over the world. The answers to the claim that religious Romani people were of Orthodox faith were equally split (50.8% to 49.2%). It is important to note that 38.1% of the subjects connected child marriages only with the Romani population.

Regarding Bosniaks, almost half of the subjects did not know the basic information about them: about 48% did not know that Bosniaks were one of the major ethnic groups in Serbia and that there was an opportunity to have regular education in the Bosnian language in the parts of Serbia populated mainly by the members of Bosniak community. Even less knowledge was shown regarding cultural features, with 74.6% subjects describing "sevdalinka" belonging to Romani national minority, while 58.1% did not know the meaning of the word "muštuluk".

As for Albanians, the level of knowledge was higher when it was about identity characteristics. 83.5% students knew that Albanians did not use Cyrillic, while 59.7% recognized that the tradition of blood vendetta had not been eradicated. At the same time, the knowledge about historical and religious characteristics was on a lower level. 60.6% did not know about the participation of Albanians in the Kosovo battle, while 66.1% thought the religious Albanians were of Islamic faith.

Students' skills within intercultural competences are relatively highly developed ($M=3,88$; $SD=0,77$; $Mdn=4,11$; $Mod=4,33$). The most obvious one is the openness to other cultures and people, with most students showing readiness to understand and show empathy to the members of other ethnic groups. However, there was a discrepancy between the general openness to other cultures and the openness to particular national minorities: while 76.7% students showed an interest in meeting people from different countries, 54.7% showed readiness to learn about customs of national minorities. Also, a statistically important, but weak connection of the sex with empathy and sensitiveness for a stereotype presentation of ethnic groups, as well as the connection of the type of one's place of origin and the digital intercultural communication and an interest in meeting people from other cultures and empathy to discriminated people were noticed ($p<0,05$).

The analysis of the attitude dimension (Table 2) mostly showed the students' multicultural orientation ($M=3,62$; $SD=0,89$; $Mdn=3,80$). The most prominent was the support of the attitude that cultural cooperation could lead to a better understanding and tolerance even in the situation involving international and interethnic conflicts which was expressed by 72.8% of students. Also, 72.1% of the subjects did not think that members of other nations living in Serbia had a negative impact on Serbian culture and tradition, while 60.5% did not support the request that members of other nationalities adopted Serbian language, customs and tradition, indicating the rejection of the assimilation approach to the cultural diversity. Most of the students (61.4%) recognized the ethnic stereotypes as a problem which members of national minorities face. Simultaneously, the attitudes are less uniform concerning wider national consequences of the cultural diversities: 35.6% of students agreed that a greater number of different cultures made a society less stable, 31.8% disagreed, while 32.6% were neutral. Half of the students (51%) recognized the importance of knowing non-verbal communication and customs of other nations as important means of establishing a quality intercultural communication. Besides, an important statistically important, but weak correlation between the sex and place of origin with certain attitudes to cultural differences, assimilation, ethnic stereotypes, cultural cooperation and the threat to one's culture was noticed ($p<0,05$).

Table 2: Attitudes (degree of agreement, 1–5; responses in %; 1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree)

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Knowledge of the non-verbal communication and customs of other peoples is not very important if we understand the language they use to communicate.	22.5	28.4	26.7	11.4	11.0
The more people from different cultures enjoy being in a society, the more unstable that society becomes.	10.6	21.2	32.6	19.1	16.5
Cultural cooperation can play an important role in developing greater understanding and tolerance, even in places where interethnic conflicts exist.	4.2	6.4	16.5	27.5	45.3
Members of other ethnic groups living in Serbia should learn and use exclusively the Serbian language and adopt Serbian customs and traditions.	25.8	34.7	22.9	8.8	9.7
Members of other ethnic groups living in Serbia threaten Serbian culture and tradition.	58.1	14.0	18.6	4.7	4.7
Negative ethnic stereotypes are not a problem faced by members of national minorities in Serbia.	39.4	22.0	25.4	8.1	5.1

Source: Stojanović (2023, p. 65)

The results of the modified Bogardus scale (Table 3) showed the most prominent distance to Albanian people ($M=2.55$), then to Romani people ($M=1.66$) and the lowest to Bosniaks ($M=1.00$). The biggest non-accepting share was noticed considering the relationships of the highest level of closeness, that is marital partnerships, while the lowest was regarding the acceptance of the members of these groups as the citizens of the same country. Still, almost a fifth of the subjects would not accept Albanians even in the widest form of social relationships.

Table 3: Social Distance towards Members of National Minorities (% of Rejected Relationships)

Type of relationship	ROMANI	ALBANIANS	BOSNIAKS	SERBS
To be my spouse	67.4	66.1	44.1	4.7
To be my friend	26.7	39.4	13.1	0.8
To be members of the same organisation	15.7	33.1	9.3	0.4
To be my colleagues at work	16.9	33.1	10.2	0.4
To be my fellow student at university	12.7	28.4	8.5	1.3
To live in my neighborhood	22.0	35.6	11.0	1.7
To live in my country	4.7	19.1	3.8	0.4
Mean	1.66	2.55	1.0	0.09
Std. Dev.	2.05	2.75	1.75	0.52

Source: Author's elaboration based on Stojanović (2023, p. 73)

4. DISCUSSION

On the whole, the results of the research indicated relatively developed, but not uniform intercultural competences of students. While the skills and attitudes were mainly oriented in a multicultural way, the knowledge about particular national minorities in the surrounding areas was on a lower level. Students recognized the multicultural character of the society rather successfully, but what was missing was the recognition of concrete ways in achieving diversity and minority rights. It is important to emphasize that there was a lack of knowledge when cultural diversity was estimated related to the minority groups which are part of Serbia. Such a finding could be considered in the larger context, the context of enforcing minority rights in Serbia, where in a formal legal way diversity is recognized, but not applied in everyday practice (Bašić, 2023). The institutional and legal recognition of diversity per se is not sufficient for the development of intercultural relationships, it is also necessary to respect diversity through the process of education, socialization, dialogue and everyday communication (Joković Pantelić, Stjelja, 2023).

Single findings additionally indicated a possibility that the lack of specific knowledge left a space for a generalized picture of certain minority groups. It was particularly noticeable in the answers stating that underage marriages were typical of Romani population, which reflected the presence of stereotypical pictures in a larger social discourse (Gligorić et al., 2021).

The findings related to the correlation between social-demographic factors and certain aspects of skills and attitudes could be explained by different experiences and patterns of socialization, where the differences based on the place of origin could be connected with a different level of exposure to cultural diversity, whereas differences based on the sex should be interpreted very carefully, given the female-oriented structure of the sample. Such findings indicated that the intercultural competence is a multi-dimensional and complex concept, whose adequate comprehension required considering different

components, such as attitudes, knowledge but also actual behavior (Rokos, Khapova, Laumann, 2023). Positively oriented attitudes towards cultural diversity do not need to involve enough knowledge about 'the others', nor the readiness for direct contact. It indicates that we need to see intercultural competence as the correlation of its various dimensions, but also through their manifestations in concrete intergroup relationships. Also, the development of intercultural competences should not be based on only promoting and enhancing general attitudes and openness to diversity and different, but also on gaining more concrete knowledge and developing experience of a direct intergroup contact. In this context, the issue of social distance becomes more important, given that it can indicate the level of real readiness for a closer form of social relationships with members of another group. The previous research (Dronjak, Mihić, 2023) showed the correlation between social distance and intergroup contact and discrimination tendencies whereas a more frequent intergroup contact was associated with a lower social distance.

The results of the Bogardus scale show that accepting members of national minorities is not unequivocal, but that the readiness to accept a certain social relationship changes according to the level of closeness. Regarding the results about intercultural competences, this finding can indicate the discrepancy between a declarative openness towards cultural diversity, possessing adequate skills and readiness to establish close intergroup relationships. In other words, intercultural orientations do not need to be automatically followed by readiness to accept cultural diversity in one's closest surroundings. Earlier studies of the student population (Petrović, Miladinović, 2014) showed relatively stable patterns of ethnic distancing which can be connected to historical experiences of intergroup conflicts, presence of stereotypes and prejudice, as well as limited opportunities for direct contact with members of other groups. In that sense, the findings of this research showed a similar pattern: readiness to accept culturally different groups on a global level, but weaker when subjects were expected to show a higher level of social closeness. Such a pattern corresponds to the findings of more recent research in Serbia, indicating a relatively high level of tolerance but simultaneously different levels of distance towards particular ethnic groups (Živković, 2023).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Intercultural competences are a complex and multidimensional concept, whose investigation is a challenge due to a different conceptualization and the ways of operating. The results of this research indicate that different dimensions of intercultural competences are not expressed in a uniform way: while skills and attitudes of the students were mostly oriented in an intercultural manner, the knowledge about particular national minorities showed inconsistencies. At the same time, the findings of the Bogardus scale of social distance open the question of to what extent general openness to cultural diversity implies readiness to closer intergroup relationships. There is an obvious need to distinguish between a declarative approach to diversity and its manifestation in concrete social relationships. The findings of this research therefore can be a contribution to a further empirical discussion about the content, structure and means of measuring and development of intercultural competences with young people. The importance of simultaneous consideration of knowledge, skills and attitudes is particularly significant, including the indicators which enable an insight into the means of connecting intercultural orientation with particular patterns of intergroup relationships.

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