

A ROMANIAN – BELGIAN COMPARISON ON WORK RELATED STEREOTYPES AND BEHAVIOURS

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Abstract: *In the larger context of controversies on West-European – East-European countries differences, the present paper analyzes a more specific intercultural difference that may have its roots in the dominating values of a West-European society vs. an East-European one. We refer mainly at the differences between the Romanian and the Belgian culture regarding the way individuals from the two countries see work, the way they relate to work, their beliefs and stereotypes regarding work, and their work related behaviours. The paper tries to outline the fact that the cultural differences on work related stereotypes and behaviours surpass the existing similarities that are a result of the multiple influences both societies were subject of.*

Key words: *work stereotypes, behaviours at work, Romanian culture, Belgian culture.*

1. Introduction

A Romanian – Belgian comparison may always be considered as being a mere example of the larger comparison between West-European countries and East-European countries. But the reality sometimes contradicts common sense. Despite the fact that the two cultures belong indeed, from either an historical, cultural, and/or economical point of view, to very different regions of Europe, the two analyzed cultures have many common aspects.

Both the Romanian and the Belgian culture are eclectic cultures. The Romanian culture is an eclectic one as a result of multiple influences to which it was the subject of along its history [9]. The many immigration waves from Italians, and, more recently, North Africans, turned Belgium into an eclectic society also with

a wide appreciation for many forms of culture and identities. Being submitted to the Romans, the Spanish, the Austrians, the French, the Dutch and the Germans, has turned Belgian culture into a rich influenced estate but also turned it into an individualistic culture, despising authority [14].

A direct consequence of the eclectic culture is the diversity that characterizes both countries.

Diversity, as well as equality and freedom, are important values for Belgians and are manifested in anti-discrimination laws, and even more in common habits such as clothing, eating patterns and the expression of physical relations [6]. The existence of opposite elements in the same geographical space or in the same space of thinking and action is the modality in

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which diversity manifests in the Romanian society [9].

These are just few of the cultural aspects that could be considered as criteria for an intercultural comparison between the Romanian and the Belgian culture. The present article intends to make a pertinent comparison regarding only work related practices and behaviours in the two societies. Even though the cultural dimensions, especially the dominating values of the two cultures, might be the underlying factors behind the analyzed differences, we do not intend to find a cultural explanation for the identified differences but, merely, to accurately describe them in terms of practical implications for the working environment.

2. Romanian – Belgian Cultural

Differences on Hofstede's Dimensions

The main criterion when making an intercultural comparison in the area of work and organizations is Hofstede's theory on cultural differences. According to his study's results, cultures can be defined through a number of five characteristics [17]. These characteristics are bipolar dimensions: power distance – the equity or inequity between superiors and subordinates in an organization; uncertainty avoidance - lack of tolerance toward ambiguity and the need for formal rules or the openness toward change; individualism vs. collectivism – the distribution of attention, resources and personal commitment toward the self or toward the belonging community; masculinity vs. femininity – the focus on personal objectives (material rewards, promotion) and assertiveness which are in opposition with interpersonal purposes (friendly climate) and tolerance; short-term vs. long-term orientation [9-17].

The Romanian culture is characterized by a rather collective orientation [1] while Belgium's culture has an individualistic

orientation [10]. In a rather individualistic country, people tend to have more loose relationships than in the countries characterised by collectivism. In Belgium people stress on personal goals, achievements and individual rights. It is expected from each other to fulfil their own needs. In Belgium, group work is important, but everybody has the right to give his own opinion.

Concerning the distance to power, both Romania and Belgium have a rather high power distance [9-17]. In Romania the inequity between different social classes or between superiors or subordinates is high. Belgium, on the other hand, exhibits an unequal distribution of wealth. Belgium does not have an enormous gap between the wealthy and the poor, but they have a very strong belief in equality for each citizen.

Another common characteristic of the two analysed cultures is the fact that both are rather feminine cultures [1-17]. Masculine traits such as assertiveness, materialism/material success, self-centeredness, power, strength, and individual achievements are not main characteristics of the two countries. The stress on quality of life and social security makes Belgium a less masculine state as opposed to other European countries.

Uncertainty avoidance is the dimensions that differentiate both Romanian and Belgium culture from the rest of Europe Union countries. Both societies have high level of uncertainty avoidance [9-17]. Belgians are not keen on uncertainty; by planning everything carefully they try to avoid the uncertainty. The vast amount of rules also reveals the high level of uncertainty avoidance. Romanians avoid uncertainty by finding easy temporary solution to encountered problems.

A particularity of the Romanian culture is the strong short-term orientation [1]. Values associated with short-term

orientation are respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one's face [17]. Thrift and perseverance are the main values that characterize a culture with long-term orientation such as the Belgian one [10].

3. Work related stereotypes in the two cultures

Many of the stereotypes and work related behaviours in the Romanian organizations derive from the main values of the Romanian culture as presented above.

One common stereotype in the transition period after the fall of communism was that Romanians do not work. When stating that Romanians are lazy, individuals do not refer to themselves, but to the others [5]. The identification is not with the whole population, but only with those who are considered to have positive characteristic. This stereotype is slowly changing. Studies made on high-schoolers and students [7] show that this category of population considers Romanians are hard-working and ambitious.

In the Romanian public institutions the state is still seen as impersonal. The practical consequence is the belief that not working affects no one [5]. In Romania the capitalism principle "time is money" is taken into account rather in a symbolic perspective than in a practical one. Many Romanians lose a great deal of time in order to benefit from cheaper services but request punctuality and time efficiency from the institutions or organizations perceived as having occidental claims [5].

Another powerful stereotype in the Romanian society is that there is corruption at all levels. This leads, in particular situation, to superficiality at the workplace [5]. The work in Romanian organization is governed rather by values related to personal relation than work related values [9].

On the other hand, Belgians workers are known for compromise, negotiation and common sense [13]. They are known for appreciating clear facts and figures. This is confirmed in practice. Belgian managers for example are often praised for their compromises. Belgians don't place themselves on the foreground, but they perfectly know how to cope with different cultures [15].

Organizational structures are mostly horizontal and simple in Flanders, with participatory management, active consensus and delegation of responsibility. Walloons opt for structure, formal organization, clear hierarchical systems and directive leadership. Job titles and ranks are important for Walloons as well as for Flemish.

Finally, stereotypical Belgian values such as motivation and perseverance are appreciated abroad, in combination with their flexibility and down-to-earth attitude. However it also has to be stressed that it's not always 'all work and no play' for a Belgian. They might work a lot but also take time to thoroughly enjoy their (often) scarce free time [11].

4. Attitudes toward work in the two countries

Every individual seeks in a job specific characteristic which motivates him to perform that work. The motivational values of work differ not only from one individual to another but, also, from one culture to another.

For Romanians the most important characteristics of a job are related to security and big earnings [2]. For 75% of the Romanians the security of the job is the most important motivational value. The promotion opportunities, an interesting work, working independently or being helpful to the society are less important characteristics. Between 30% and 43% of the Romanians are driven to work by these characteristics.

On the other side, Belgians are not motivated by the big earnings. Only 18% of the Flemish population consider this aspect as the most important in a job [2]. The safety of the job and doing an interesting work are much more motivating aspects. Despite the fact that only 2% of the Belgians consider that their jobs assure them big earnings [2], they are the second most productive workers in Europe [13].

When asked about the importance of work Romanians have different answers depending on the interviewing conditions. In informal and unstructured situations, many declare that, in general, Romanians are not hard workers, while in structured and formal interviews the respond is completely different. Heintz argues that Romanians work rather for the results of their work than for the work itself [5]. In the services business, the motives of doing a good job lay in the responsibility toward the manager, the co-workers or toward the clients rather than in the responsibility toward a professional demand.

Only 46% of the Romanian place work as the main solution to succeed in society. The rest of the population considered luck and faith as determinants of the successful social adaptation. In the Romanian organizations work is seen as superficial, disorganized, unequal, and efficient only in the presence of superiors [3].

The situation is quite different in the Belgian culture. Belgium is a genuine collective bargaining economy in which a great deal is regulated by agreements between worker and employer representative organizations [13]. In a 2009 study made by the British Psychological Society, Belgians rated themselves higher on competency than they did on warmth [4]. Belgians consider themselves hard workers, with an appreciation for culture [16].

In analyzing work related attitudes and behaviours, we must also take into account

employment commitment. According to the result of the Soros Foundation Study [2], only 6% of the Romanians consider the jobs as being more than just a source of money. 17% of the respondents would still work even if they didn't need money. These low percentages indicate that a third of the Romanian adult population has a low level of employment commitment [2].

Comparative studies show that the Belgians are even less committed to work than Romanians (the calculated index for Belgium is 10 while for Romania is 13) [2]. Still, Belgians have different responses on the two dimensions. 12% of them agree that the job is more than just a source of money, but only 7% would still work if they didn't need the money.

According to the same study, Romanians are more willing to overwork for their organization than Belgians are [2]. This means that Romanians are more committed to their organizations. This result is intriguing if we take into account the fact that Romanians are less satisfied with their jobs than Belgians [2]. A possible explanation of this result might be that the most important characteristic of a job for the Romanians is security. Even though they are not completely satisfied with their job, they do not intend to leave a job that is considered to be safe.

Romanians prefer to work rather for someone else than on their own (63% of the working population prefer to be an employee for someone else and only 30% to work on their own) [2]. The need for safety is also seen in the preference for working in a big company and for the state rather than in a private company [2-5].

Belgians, on the other hand, prefer in a significant greater measure to work in a private company (52% of the investigated population) [2]. In concordance with their stereotypes, they also prefer to work as employee for someone else (65%).

5. Comparative Analysis of Communication Practices at Work

One last aspect that we would like to take into account in this article is related to the cultural differences in the communication practices at work.

Romanians' discursive practices vary between words and silence. In the public speeches, argumentative speeches, or even in the informal situations, communication focuses mainly on the speaker, on what he/she has or want to say, and less on the listener's needs. This tendency is easily observed even in work situations like meetings or in the educational environment [9]. Romanians prefer oral instead of written communication, many business agreements are first made only through oral communication. Face to face communication is preferred to mediated one.

In many communication situations, the degree in which the two interlocutors focus on the information is low: subjects are discussed from a general perspective and the speaker assumes that the listener share the same information as he does.

The persuasive components of the communication lay not in the transmitted information but in the personal relation between the interlocutors [9]. The communication, as well as the work, is governed by the values of interpersonal relation and the desire to keep the personal relation with the interlocutor [5].

Lack of assertive behaviour in communication is a consequence of the previous mentioned prudence. Not stating clearly something leaves the opportunity for modifying the meaning of communication without affecting the personal relation. In some situation questions are seen as a threat and, therefore, the listener avoids asking them.

In Western European countries, such as Belgium, oral tradition is less present than in other cultures. Written communication

is still much preferred. Especially at work, where business communication is even subjected to a set of rules, depending on the goal of the text [8]. E-mail is often used, even in formal situations, whereas face to face contacts are no longer a must. The stress lays on the information of the message. The listener stands critical towards the information he receives and it is common that he reacts and questions the content of the message [12].

As mentioned before, Belgians are fond of clear facts and figures. Therefore the content of the message in formal situations such as lectures and presentations is neutral and objectively approached in order to keep the information from being distorted.

6. Conclusions

Both Romanian and Belgian work related stereotypes and behaviours lay in the cultural particularities and in the main values of the two countries. As part of a collective, short-term oriented and collective culture, Romanians seek security and big earnings in a job. Despite the fact that work is seen most as a source of money and does not motivate through itself, Romanians are not likely to easily leave their job. Romanians behaviour in interpersonal or work situation is still governed by the traditional values. Interpersonal relations are of great importance for Romanians; unwritten rules that govern this type of relations are considered to be the norms for behaving in every kind of situation.

Unlike in Romania, stereotypes about work related behaviour in the Belgian society are grounded, they are productive and more motivated by the nature of the work than by its profit. Like in many other West-European countries, a lot of activities in Belgium are abided by implementation and regulation even though there is a strong sense for freedom of speech, free opinion and tolerance.

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