

# USING THE STORY-TELLING TECHNIQUE IN THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

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**Abstract:** *This paper contains the main results of a qualitative research on Romanians national identity. The research proposes a new approach to the national identity based on two methodological elements: the patriotic songs as a stimulus for reflection on national identity and the presentation of data in the form of story-telling. The theoretical background integrates the social identity theory and the theory of social representations. The main conclusion of the research is that Romanians have nowadays a negative social identity in relation with their own country and the political class is seen as the main culprit for the country's bad situation.*

**Key words:** *social identity, social representation, story-telling, patriotic song.*

## 1. Introduction

One of the social problems facing Romania today might be called *national image deficit* in relation to other European countries. There is ample evidence to support this thesis. Recent studies about the image of Romania and Romanian migrants in Italy and Spain, the main destinations of temporary emigration in the period 2001-2006 [20] revealed the image deficit that Romanians have in relation with the European partners. It seems that in Italy the Romanians took the place of the Albanians as 'black people' of the collective imaginary, especially after Romania's entry in the European Union and after the influx of Roma people with Romanian citizenship in Italy [7]. Especially during the last three years,

starting from crimes committed only by Romanians in Italy, an entire nation was tagged with the adjective *killer* [18].

According to a recent study on the perception of Romanians in Spain, the most frequent spontaneous association that Spaniards have about Romanians is 'delinquency'. The image of Romania as a country is also not positive: 21% of Spanish people associated the Romania's image with poverty and misery, 9% with delinquency and 5% with Roma presence (data taken from <http://www.bbc.co.uk>).

In a focus group that I conducted in December 2010, the participants - students in a master's program in social development - have raised the following problem: 'Even Europe no longer wants us. Even if, for twenty years, it seemed that we were on a good path, we are always the

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weakest in Europe and we are ashamed to speak Romanian in the street when we go into the EU’.

In this article I will present the main results of a qualitative research on Romanians identity today. My intention was to find out what Romanians think about themselves and about their country in the current European context. In the research I used the patriotic song as a stimulus to identify attributes of national identity and I presented the main results in the form of story-telling.

## **2. Social identity and social representations about the nation**

In the theoretical background of this paper I integrated the theory of social identity and the theory of social representations in the attempt to better describe the main elements of the national identity. An extensive literature deals with the theme of national identity and the relationship between identity and social prejudices [12], [6], [23], [11], [8].

In the ‘70s of last century, Henri Tajfel developed the social identity theory based on concepts of categorization and social comparison [22].

According to Laszlo, Ferenczhalmy and Szalai [15], the relationship between social representation and national identity has been neglected for a long period of time. The social representations theory and the social identity theory have developed independently of each other. At present, however, there are several theoretical endeavours to integrate social representations theory and social identity theory. The general idea is that the representations existing in groups fulfil some sort of identity function.

For most of us, most of the time, identity is something unproblematic (Jenkins, 2008). We seem to be aware of who exactly we are and who the other

significant persons in our lives are. But there are situations where our identity may become problematic. This always happens in relationships. More specifically, this happens by reference or comparison to another social entity: another individual or another social group.

The premise of social identity theory is that individuals organize social reality including themselves and others in significant social categories. The construction of social identity is based on self-perception, consciousness of belonging to the group and the comparison with other significant. Social categories Tajfel considered that individuals aspire to a positive social identity [22]. This happens if the groups that individuals belong to (*in-groups*) are socially valued. The comparison between groups is made in hierarchical terms: if the *in-group* is considered to be superior to the *out-group*, then the social identity is positive; if the *in-group* is considered to be inferior to the *out-group*, then the social identity is negative.

The result of the social comparison consists in a self-assessment: the individual becomes aware of its value as member of social groups. Tajfel shows that there are two typical situations that arise in the process of social comparison.

Case A: Through the inter-groups comparison individuals realize that they have a positive social identity that pleases them and gives them self-esteem (*positive self-concept*). Consequently, they will seek to preserve their positive identity and superiority over.

Case B: Through the inter-groups comparison individuals realize that they have a negative social identity (*negative self-concept*) which causes discomfort and distress. In this case, individuals will be motivated to change something to improve their self-esteem. The action strategies depend on the so-called *cognitive*

*alternatives* which individuals perceive about the relationship between groups. Most often individuals use *social mobility* and *psychological mobility* strategies [22], [6].

The theory of social identity is subject of criticism to be taken into account. For example, the social comparison process is considered not to be general but specific only for groups with a collectivist and comparative ideology [6]. However, the theory of social identity proposes useful concepts in explaining the social mobility and the relationships based on ethnicity: *self-esteem, social comparison, categorization, strategies for change, legitimate or illegitimate nature of hierarchical relations between groups* and especially the concept of *social identity* which is different from that of *personal identity*. The *personal identity* contains the unique and original attributes of individuals, undefined by inter-group comparison. The specific of the social identity theory is that it focuses on the *perception* of relations between groups and on the *meaning* and *interpretation* that individuals give to these relationships.

Nowadays there are many social phenomena than can be explained by the social identity theory: Romanian migrants who have left the country because they felt they had no chance for a better life in Romania; Romanian migrants who have returned home (*return migration* [20]) because they have suffered hardship in comparison with the natives and have perceived as impermeable the boundaries between *us* and *them*; the ethnic perception and feeling of *generalized fear* of Romanians in Harghita county regarding the force and the organizational capacity of the Magyar world where they feel they could never penetrate [4].

For our research problem, the other useful theoretical framework is the theory of social representations. Serge Moscovici

defined social representation as a system of values, concepts and practices related to objects, aspects or dimensions of the social environment that allows to establish the life framework of individuals and groups. It is equally an orientation tool in perceiving situations and elaborating responses [17].

Exploring various definitions of social representations, Neculau [17] shows that they are an evaluator unit, a grid of reading the reality, a location in the world of values and an interpretation of this world.

The link between identity and social representations is very close. On the one hand, representations are fundamental in building social identity because they contribute to the creation of social order and to the establishment of meanings given to people, things, categories, phenomena etc. On the other hand, the assumed identity determines the formation or assimilation of new social representations, according to the specific cultural groups to which individuals belong.

Moliner [10] sustains that individuals define their identity in relation to the social representations of their group, so social representations are directly involved in structuring groups and constructing social identities.

Social representations and social identity are interrelated phenomena. Social representations function as building blocks for social identities, which in turn create other social representations [1].

In my research on social representations about Romanian identity I used a conceptual system proposed by Curelaru [10] – a very useful tool in analyzing the content of social representations. According to this scheme, any social representation has three components: cognitive, affective and behavioural. So I tried to identify *cognitions* (what you know, what you think), *emotions* (what you feel) and *prescriptions of behaviour*

(what to do) regarding the Romanians national identity.

### 3. The research methodology

The research problem is the following: which are the social representations of Romanians about their country and about themselves as Romanians? In terms of social identity theory, it is true that Romanians have nowadays rather a negative social identity in relation to other ethno-national groups in Europe? In order to answer these questions I conducted a qualitative research.

For gathering data I used the technique of obtaining responses caused by a special written stimulus: texts of songs with patriotic message. The research instrument was a questionnaire applied directly or through electronic mail. I chose five stimulus items, each of them being a part of well-known patriotic songs in Romania, including a fragment of the national anthem. The main themes of the songs are: the history of the Romanians, Transylvania, the lost territories, the foreign occupation, the struggle of national reunification and the power of national regeneration. I took into account the messages of songs to be both positive and negative, to avoid inducing an attitudinal bias or halo effect.

Through open questions, the research subjects were asked to comment the verse and to write all they want about music or other aspects of the songs. For the selection of the sample I used the snowball method.

The social categories chosen for this research were: students, managers, retired persons and Romanian migrants abroad. The total number of subjects who completed the questionnaire was 42 (from 45 sent questionnaires) of which 17 directly on paper and 25 by e-mail. The data collection took place from January 20

to February 10, 2011. The sample had the following structure: 17 men and 25 women; 17 students, 12 managers from large and medium companies in Romania, 6 Romanian migrants abroad (in Italy and USA) and 7 retired persons. I chose these categories based on the following premises: students represent the younger generation and their decisions on the future can be influenced by their social representations about the country [5]. Managers represent a professional category with significant openings to international relations based on both market values and the social values such as social responsibility [19] or ethnic economy [14]. Pensioners can bring an interesting perspective in the research because of the comparative interpretation of different socio-political regimes that they have lived in Romania. Romanian migrants abroad bring an 'outside' perspective and they already have an experience of *social mobility* choices - in terms of Tajfel's theory.

For data analysis I used qualitative analysis techniques. First I used the open coding technique [3], [21], then I summarized the data by the category scheme proposed by Curelaru [10]. Specifically, I identified the following dimensions in the subjects comments: 1) cognitions: ethnic/national stereotypes, categories (lyrics classifications, comments to the message of the patriotic songs), scenarios (explanations, rationalizations and comparisons); 2) emotions / feelings expressed in the comments; 3) prescriptive elements (suggested actions and social changes). I decided to synthesize the qualitative research data in a typical qualitative product: the *story-telling* [21]. This type of *field stories* is based on the idea of *building worlds* [21]. Basically, the researcher allows the world described/ investigated to speak for itself. 'The story

is told through the voices of the subjects' [21].

The story-telling technique was used in different studies about national identity highlighting different identity experiences. I mention here the study about how Pakistani women use to associate their suffering with a personal honourable identity [16] and the study about the reconstruction of the past identity associated with the communist regime by the citizens from East Berlin [2].

In the first stage of using the story-telling technique I wrote four stories. Each of them was representative for the perspective of the four social categories considered as significant in this research: *the student, the manager, the migrant and the pensioner*. In the second stage of the analysis I wrote a single story that summarizes the others. The result is a story that recreates the research subjects representations of national identity. I call this story 'The Romanian citizen perspective on the Romanian identity'.

#### 4. The research results

In this part of the paper I present this story and then I discuss the research results:

'Love of country and faith in God are coordinated to be found in the Romanians philosophy of life. Throughout history, as a small political power, we could not survive without divine help. Now the Romanians are afraid because they are impoverished economically and spiritually. And then they ask divine protection. We now need such protection'.

The Romanian people had difficult moments in time suffering different oppressions. But we always used to put the blame on external factors such as the barbarity of tyrants. Now we are a nation

asleep that cannot be mobilized when it is necessary. We blame others because we are asleep. We victimize and pity ourselves. This mentality is typical for the Romanian people. *The sword does not cut the bent head* - with this mentality we lost a lot throughout history. We are embittered and no one hears us crying. Romanians have scared France, Italy and Spain. We have a very bad image in Europe. And then what is now Transylvania, when Romanians here prefer to buy property in Hungary? *My holy Transylvania* is no more an interesting topic.

However Romania is a faithful country. In fact it is a rich country but poorly managed. The national anthem is a special patriotic song mobilizing the Romanians to do everything for the good and prosperity of the country. Unfortunately, many of us associate it with the political class that is responsible for the disastrous situation the country has reached. It's about a political class that made the Romanians go wandering through the wide world. However, the anthem gives us a patriotic feeling yet when we listen to it occasionally at sport events.

We have a poor country, although it really is rich. The lyrics of patriotic songs such as *poor rich country, have lived long upset* accurately reflect the reality. The Romanian people are sad and suffering hardship, although the country has resources of all kinds. Although there are resources and affinities between people it seems that nothing good happens. It is true that throughout history there have been many uprisings and wars that led to fragmentation and national dissolution. However, we complain too much because we are poor and we grieve. At the same time, the Romanian people are optimistic and believe that there is still a chance. Romanians love

their country and God. But we must be careful: if we cling only to the religious element we can never be a strong presence in Europe.

We are indeed a nation asleep and we should wake up and do something for the country. We must not forget that we have noble origins and have many great ancestors. Unfortunately we have forgotten them in history. Now it would not be bad for the country to be smart and go on the way of other former communist states such as Czech Republic and Poland. The causes of our failures should be sought within us, in every individual. But it is true that to succeed we must believe in something.'

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

In general, the stereotypes associated with the *Romanian people* have negative charge and fall into a logic of self-blame under unfavourable external pressures: *people asleep, we do not..., we are deadlocked* because the Romanian people were always *oppressed*. Most commentaries contain the idea of a national identity deficit both in ascertaining and prescriptive form: *awakening to reality, encouragement to change something, calling the unity of the Romanians, recalling national values* etc. In many cases, the discourse is ambivalent: on the one hand, the subjects declare their discontent, sadness and disappointment about the fate of the country, but on the other hand they always refer to the need to exit from this unfavourable situation.

Regarding the emotional elements present in the subjects responses, I have identified six social types (based on the *holiday living model* developed by Cucu-Oancea [9]): the sensitive, the nihilist, the social, the optimistic, the angry and the nostalgic. The *sensitive* type declares that

he/she feels nervous when he/she hears patriotic songs, vibrates, cries and feels national pride. The *nihilist* feels nothing and declares that the patriotic songs are not appropriate for the Romanians identity. The *social* type lives the emotion of patriotic songs just in a social context (sports events or entertainment moments). The *angry* type declares that the patriotic song makes him/her to have feelings of revolt against the country's current situation and against the political class. The *optimistic* has confidence, hope and declares that the patriotic songs represent an urge to change for the better. Finally, the *nostalgic* type regrets the past and says that he/ she has feelings of pity and compassion for the Romanian people.

In conclusion, this study proposed a novel approach to the national identity of Romanians. Given that the national identity attributes are most often analyzed using quantitative methodology such as European Values Studies or Eurobarometers, the novelty of this study is the qualitative approach based on two methodological elements: 1) the patriotic song as a stimulus for reflection on national identity and 2) the presentation of research data in the form of story-telling.

The main conclusion is that Romanians have nowadays a negative social identity in relation to their own country and the political class is seen as the main culprit for the bad situation of the country.

The main advantages of using methodology based on story-telling are the following: I obtained data quickly and with low cost; the qualitative data contained information regarding stereotypes, feelings and behavioural prescriptions so I managed to follow the specific analysis scheme of social representations; the presentation of the research results in the form of story-

telling keeps unaltered the natural language of the research subjects.

The main limits of this study are the following: the small sample of the research and the focus only on four social categories. For the future I intend to expand the research considering the possibility of more refined analysis using new criteria such as age, place of residence (urban or rural), occupation and historical region of origin in order to produce new story-telling discourses about the national identity.

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