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Problems of integration of disadvantaged students in higher education
(background study)

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Problems of integration of disadvantaged students in higher education

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The present analysis is concerned with the theoretical foundations of sociological research on the issue of school integration of disadvantaged students, an aspect of social life too little studied in Romanian sociological literature. Most studies in this area focus on the integration of students at elementary or secondary level, because of the association, both practical and ideological, between lower educational level and the universal right to education. There are numerous studies, national and local, targeting school integration problems, school dropout, social conditions of educational performance at elementary or secondary level, that retain some resemblances in terms of theoretical and research objectives with the issue of the integration of disadvantaged students in higher education (Chipea, 2010).

Social inequality in academia

Although the study of social inequality has an important theoretical body, there is no universally accepted definition of social inequality. A. Sen shows that theories of inequality are diverse and in conflict with each other (Sen, 1995). For example, John Rawls considers equality as the equal right to liberty and distribution of primary goods, to Ronald Dworkin equality means equal treatment and equal access to resources, and Thomas Nagel talks about economic equality etc. (Sen, 1995). The views expressed by Nagel and Dworkin represent the dominant perspective about inequality, which is concerned with the economic stages of distribution and redistribution of the social product, realized through latent mechanisms such as the market, or through the active actions of social groups with an ideological character. The economic interpretation reduces the problem of inequality to the quantity of resources available to individuals or social groups, associated with the social position occupied by those individuals or groups which determine the amount of resources received through the distribution or redistribution of the social product. The principle of economic rationality assumes that the ultimate goals of individuals or groups are of materialistic nature and all the other purposes have an instrumental, intermediary role. According to this view, most studies concerning inequality in economics or sociology are concerned with the mechanisms of distribution and redistribution of wealth,
distribution of the positions of socioeconomic status in society, using concepts such as economic and social capital, or reproduction of social status for explanatory purposes.

The theoretical approach of inequality is based on two postulates which are apparently opposed. The first postulate considers inequality as a "natural" condition, according to the principle of proportional equality formulated by Aristotle (Temkin, 1996), which, in economic interpretation, translates into access to resources in proportion to the social value created. This view is consistent with theories that present social inequality as an adjustment of society made by the free market, an idea embedded in the individualistic interpretation of the meritocratic model, supported by thinkers as Locke and the utilitarian thinkers in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. This approach values the individual responsibility combined with a diminished role of the state in correcting social inequality. Passing to the argument about education, this ideology encourages private funding for schooling. Education is conditioned by the material resources possessed by the student (family funding, scholarships), the closest model based on this view being the American higher educational system. In this model, higher education is limited by economic means or the exceptional skills of the individual in the absence of economic resources, vision that is consonant with the individualism and meritocracy characteristic to the American society (Altbach, 1994).

The second postulate considers inequality as a purely social product, explicitly theorized by Rousseau (Hoffding, 1930) and supported by the socialist spectrum of political thought. Developed in the context of the debate on the natural state and natural right, this theory proposes the concept of universal right as a fundamental principle of humanism. The right to education becomes of an universal character, recognized as such by the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" in 1948, which stipulates in Article 26, inter alia, that education is a universal right, free, at least at the elementary level where is instituted as mandatory, and higher education must be accessible to all on merit (Spring, 2000).

We can observe from the previously stated assertions that the issue of inequality in education differ according to the framework of the analysis: basic education, providing individual literacy without which social integration would not be possible in a modern society, and higher education, which is seen as a key lever distribution of social positions with high social prestige. Free and compulsory elementary and secondary education has become a quasi-universal practice and is limited only by the extreme economic conditions, characteristic of the poorest Third World countries, characterized by a high level of illiteracy (Lockheed şi Verspoor, 1991). There is a strong correlation between literacy levels of society and its economic development, industrialization evolved along with literacy in the last two centuries. If the relationship between labor productivity and literacy is strong, is not as obvious the relationship between economic development and the number of graduates of higher education, especially if we consider some specializations (De Meulemeester şi Rochat, 1995; Hanusek şi Wellch, 2006). If the social role of elementary education determines its egalitarian character, the elitism and professionalization...
characteristic to universities proposes the higher education system as a source generating social inequality in society which is within the meaning of the principle of proportionality mentioned above. The concept of equality of opportunity captures this aspect which does not deny the inegalitarian structure of society and sets out the right of everyone to get into elite society in terms of their capacities. This position with an objectivist allure, is essentially an ideological one facing other interests in society such as the trend of preservation of the elite addressed, among others, by Pareto in his theory on the circulation of elites (Pareto, 1966).

At the beginning of the twentieth century the opportunities to attend higher education were very limited, a privilege for the upper classes. An unprecedented expansion of universities was registered in the postwar period which determined the so called “massification” of higher education. The expansion of higher education determined the diversification and stratification of universities causing, among other things, the devaluation of the university degree. In the advanced countries this process has been there for about 50 years, but in Romania the process has just started represented by the differentiation of universities in elite institutions such as the research centered universities and tier two or three institutions that are much less selective (Shavit, Arum, Gamoran şi Menachem, 2007). Academic inequality analysis should take account of this new reality being configured in Romania, a situation similar which that can be found in Poland (Kwiek, 2003). The main factor bearing on selectivity was the important presence of private or small public universities in Romania (Nicolescu, 2003) with an institutional predilection towards learning goals.

**Social exclusion in academia**

Beginning with the seventies the issue of inequality is addressed by the concept of social exclusion that captures both aspects of inequality situations: the social characteristics of groups involved in the situation of inequality and social action that contribute to inequality. The concept was developed in the context of French social analysis but will be adopted in the discourse on inequality in the British or American sociology, with several changes of meaning pertaining to specific cultural and social characteristics (Sen, Environment şi Development, 2000).

Social exclusion focuses on public policy or structural deficiencies that limit access to resources of social groups. These limitations may arise as difficulties of access in education and the labor market, lack of institutional support of the state or social networks, generally accompanied by an attitude of rejection by the majority. All these issues mentioned before highlights the multidimensional character of social exclusion (Pierson, 2001). Various forms of deprivation usually occur together, such as membership of a minority, poverty and dropout, the interest of analytical studies of social exclusion is
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heading towards setting prevalent forms of deprivation and understanding the social mechanisms that
generate them (De Haan, 2000).

There are many social theories supported by empirical research that explains the mechanisms of
social exclusion. Social reproduction theory, proposed by Bourdieu, means that social groups
characterized by a specific cultural identity and social interaction, develop ways of social representations
and manifestations (habitus) that require stability of certain socio-cultural characteristics, transmitted
from one generation to another (Webb, Schirato și Danaher, 2002). In Bourdieu's view, the habitus has
an important influence on social positioning of the individual and of the social group, something that
denotes a conditioning determined on the one hand, by the characteristics (cultural) of the group and
on the other hand, the “hetero” identification made by other groups that are in social competition.
Negative attitude towards the disadvantaged group is supported by a series of prejudices, stereotypes
that are also transmitted inter-generationally. Bourdieu believed that higher education contributes to
the maintenance of social differences, encouraging a specific socio-cultural climate (elitist habitus)
determining the reproduction of social inequality effect (Hatost, 2006; Webb, Schirato și Danaher, 2002).
Empirical data shows that while access to higher education improved over time, the functioning of the
system determines the favorable positioning of privileged social classes. The dilemma in relation to the
widening access to higher education is the clarification regarding that it contributes to reducing social
inequality or, conversely, leads to deepening of social inequality because the benefits from this widening
access to universities are enjoyed mostly by the privileged classes.

There are interpretations of social exclusion that does not support the culpability of the majority
or the state in relation to socially excluded groups. In line with liberal and neo-liberal ideologies, it is
considered that the individual or groups suffering from social exclusion are responsible for the situation
in which the (Byrne, 2005; Pierson, 2001). In their view, inequality is the result of the attitude of these
individuals or social groups in society and they receive proportionally to what they contribute. Concepts
such as social parasitism, subclass, "culture of poverty" are characteristic to moral systems related to
individualistic societies where welfare and education are generally at very high levels (Pierson, 2001). It
is considered by the promoters of this ideology that in modern capitalist societies, characterized by the
lack of explicit social exclusion policies, by the existence of a free labor market, by the general access to
university education based on merit, we cannot talk about social exclusion but of self-exclusion. The
problem of social exclusion is highly charged ideologically, stirring great passions in society and even in
academic discourses, rendering the scientific analysis rather difficult because of it.

The French interpretation of the term social exclusion is underscoring the rupture or failure of
social relations, focusing on social solidarity, on the process by which individuals or groups are partially
or totally restricted in participating in social life (De Haan, 2000). This is addressed in the literature by
the concept of social capital, which along with economic capital, cultural and biological capital
represents the integrative resources of the individual in society. The scarcity of these resources is limiting the social participation of individuals and social groups, resulting in a high risk of social exclusion.

In addressing social exclusion we can follow the concept of 'citizenship' which combines political, legal and social rights of persons or groups, exclusion representing the situation when these rights are not realized. Viewed from this perspective, the right to education is a fundamental right protected by the Constitution of Romania, which in Article 32 entitled "The right to education" provides, inter alia:

1. The right to education is provided through primary compulsory education and upper secondary and vocational schools, by higher education, as well as other forms of instruction and training
2. The right of persons belonging to national minorities to learn their own language and the right to be educated in this language are guaranteed
3. Public education is free, by law. The State shall grant social scholarships to children and young people from disadvantaged families and those institutionalized in conformity with the law

The Romanian legal system is governed by the right to education in line with the "General Declaration of Human Rights" as outlined above, ideologically being influenced by the legacy of the collectivist regime of centralized education and, more recently, by the European discourse on education, such as the continuous learning doctrine. The communist education structures were reorganized by the Education Act, adopted in 1995, replaced by a new education law, which proposes major changes aimed at changing the financing and restructuring the educational system including universities, whose implementation started in 2011 and whose effects can only be estimated. Social exclusion plays an important role in the treatment of social problems by the Romanian legal system aspect which is influenced by the EU commitment to the fight against social exclusion, largely replacing the concept of poverty when addressing social policies (De Haan, 2000). The Romanian legislator made, over time, a series of legal measures aimed at reducing social exclusion in education by supporting disadvantaged groups such as students coming from poor families, from rural areas, from institutions or implementing anti-discriminatory policies against students with Roma ethnicity. The measures include material support in forms of scholarships based on merit or social condition, securing places in university campus for disadvantaged students, extending stay in institutions for institutionalized students or providing special care for Roma students. These measures are supplemented by a series of administrative actions by the Ministry of Education or by the universities, regarding programs to prevent and limit social
exclusion in universities financed by government or European funds. For example, in the University of Oradea students from institutions or orphans are exempted from paying study fees. The students considered in serious social or economic difficulty are exempted for the half of the study fees.

The legalistic approach of social exclusion is criticized by arguing that the legal superstructure of society is representing the interests of the ruling elites and do not necessarily represent the interests of disadvantaged groups. Even if there is a legal solution to the situations of social exclusion, the reality of the functioning of the bureaucratic systems implies a review of the implementation of legal measures, process that is dependent on the beliefs and attitudes of administrative management and academic communities, which together are forming the so called institutional culture, or is influenced by the pressure exerted by civil society. If we are looking beyond the implementation of legal measures, we can face the needs of disadvantaged people not taken into account and which are limiting the access to disadvantaged students in higher education. A problem in this regard is the physical access of persons with disabilities in academic institutions.

The issue of social exclusion transcends the legal regulation in that it is done through informal mechanisms such as daily interactions between disadvantaged students and "normal" students, between academics and disadvantaged students or, if we consider the establishment and strengthening of prejudices, the interaction between staff and “normal” students. In the analysis of social exclusion is essential to understand the mechanisms of interaction between different academic groups. Social exclusion always involves two parties: the privileged, who passively or actively exclude the disadvantaged groups and the disadvantaged. We used alternatively the expression privileged group or the category of “normal” students that do not suffer from discrimination and can achieve their educational aspirations. The “active” nature of social exclusion involves actions that are explicit institutional policies (formal or informal) to limit certain social groups in education, while the passive exclusion is determined by some form of the structuration of the educational system which discourages certain social groups to achieve or formulate their educational aspirations.

In the analysis of social exclusion it is necessary the characterization of institutional culture, especially in the situation of disadvantaged groups. In this sense we can distinguish a meritocratic culture, based on an elitist vision of the university that incorporates responsibility of passing the professionalization and which is less concerned for the social background of students. At the opposite end stands a culture sensitive towards social issues or at least willing to compromise intellectual standards for the integration of disadvantaged groups. We anticipate a tendency of the "grouping" of disadvantaged students intra-institutionally (depending on specialization) and at university level. Students with high socioeconomic status are more likely to attend colleges and universities offering higher post-graduation perspective, a phenomenon that causes a high selectivity and a "meritocratic culture" that is opposed to the idea of equalizing opportunities on social criteria. We propose in this
regard, an analysis of student attitudes towards the distribution of university places that are financed on social criteria, towards policies of positive discrimination against Roma or children from care institutions and towards the idea of social scholarship etc. We believe that there is a possibility of association between promoted institutional culture and the prestige of college or university, or an association between institution funding pressures and a more permissive culture due to lower student selectivity. Empirical studies show that students with low social status that follow a more prestigious college or university have a higher rate of persistence and completion of university studies (Titus, 2006).

**Disadvantaged groups**

The relationship of social inequality involves a social differentiator that represents any feature that allows a categorical approach. We mention in this sense: socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, race, physical or mental disability, sex, etc. In itself, the difference does not produce inequality which is generated in the context of competitive situations in relation to the resources of society. Categorical exclusion is the most effective method of limiting access to resources of disadvantaged groups.

The exclusion of different social categories represents a historical reality embodied in many examples. It is well known in this respect the segregationist educational policy against black students in the U.S. (Raffel, 1998). If in the case of exclusion of black students in U.S. we speak of an official policy, a formal exclusion, it should be noted that today we no longer meet such limitations on access to education, at least not in our analysis localized to Romania and Hungary, countries that are members of the European Union. Social exclusion takes instead subtle ways, manifested in the form of latent processes, which can be found in the attitudinal space which comprises prejudices, stereotypes about disadvantaged groups and groups formulations of interest that reproduce privileged social positions.

We have shown above that limitations in social participation are caused by the scarcity of resources in the form of capitals, which determine the main forms of exclusion and their corresponding groups:

- Economic capital is concerned with the economic resources available for founding educational participation. The scarcity of the economic resources is expressed by the concept of poverty. We propose the establishment of the economic resources available to students through an indicator of welfare such as income per family member. A methodological issue is raised by establishing a poverty line given the general economic conditions of the countries in which we’ll carry out the study. The criterion determining the poverty line should take in account the ability of the students to finance the specific
study program. The costs of university participation are represented by study fees, living expenses and logistical expenses such as acquisition of courses, books, notebooks, computer, etc. The lack of economic resources determines the phenomenon of permanent employment during college, especially for disadvantaged youth.

- **Social capital** is represented by extra and intra-institutional relations of the students which are able to influence the student's educational career. The quantity and quality of these relationships will determine issues such as performance or participation in research programs etc. This category may also include variables that capture the belonging to wider communities, such as ethnicity and religion, which can influence the students' social acceptance. We have to consider the disadvantaged students participation in several academic activities such as governing bodies, research programs or student exchange programs.

- **Cultural capital** represents the educational level accumulated by students before getting in the university and we can include here the concept of habitus advanced by Bourdieu which has a wider, cultural significance. The cultural level of the student may be substantially different from the university culture that seeks to integrate the student, generating a communicational conflict between student and institution, resulting difficulties of integration. Performance obtained by students in the secondary school is a strong predictor of academic performance with the hypotheses that disadvantaged students are entering the university system with weaker results that directly affect their persistence in the system (this aspect is limited by informal policies adopted by universities, due to the funding structure of the system that inhibits selectivity). Also we consider that the association between educational level of parents and the student's school integration must be tested.

- **Biological capital** refers to health status (students with disabilities or affected by chronic diseases), physical appearance but also includes issues of sex (sexual orientation). One major issue with physical disabilities is the prejudice that these affections are associated with less mental prowess. Access into institutions for disabled students is another major issue that partially has to be included in the analysis regarding institutional culture. Sexual orientation is non-issue in the universities that reflects the general standpoint towards sexuality in the Romanian society.

The economic, social or cultural capital of the family of the student correlates with persistence in college and other indicators for university integration. The chance to complete a faculty or to score better parameters regarding integration are directly influenced by variables such as ethnicity, area of
origin (urban-rural) and economic resources of family of the student.

Some disadvantaged groups have a low share in the general population of universities, a situation which could be approached by the focus group method. The same method could give valuable information on the role of management as implementers and creators of integration policies.

The issue of integration is analyzed according to the key element driving the process: the disadvantaged student, the institutional policies and culture, the structural conditions regarding general practices that characterize the educational system and the general level of civic culture and political action. The school "career" of disadvantaged students is the synthetic expression of specific processes of integration, which is expressed by indicators such as participation in courses, continuing education, retention within the university, dropout, performance evaluations, subjective indicators of student life quality etc. The institution is analyzed in an objective way as we analyze the policies aimed to establish equal opportunities accompanied by a subjective evaluation of the positioning of teachers and students regarding disadvantaged groups or towards policies of positive discrimination.
Bibliography


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