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ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT

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Abstract

The Romanian academic environment has undergone multiple changes in recent years. These changes have been triggered, on the one hand, by rallying to a series of European educational policies and, on the other hand, by the dynamics of the educational market of higher education in our country. Today's academic life is significantly different from what it was during the communist era. Academics live challenging times, being forced to adapt to multiple scientific, economic and ideological constraints. This article presents an exploratory study on the critical ethical dilemmas faced by the members of a Romanian public university, representative for this country. The main objective of the study has been to investigate the ethical dilemmas of teachers from a diachronic perspective. The research method consisted of the interview. The sample of subjects involved in this study comprises ten teachers – five senior teachers who are familiar with the academic environment of the 70s-80s and five junior teachers. A definition of ethical dilemma was proposed as a benchmark in the subjects' answers. Key findings of the study are: (a) four categories of dilemmas are common to both historical (communist and post-communist) periods, being particularized by contextual variables: moral courage vs. conformity dilemmas, loyalty dilemmas, pedagogical dilemmas; (b) seniors are more critical than juniors.

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1. Introduction

Today, the Romanian university environment faces a series of interconnected problems, at macro and micro levels, such as: lack of a coherent legislative frame (Cotoi, Sulea, & Cotoi, 2012), chronic lack of financial resources for research, ‘brain drain’ (Pănescu, 2004), corruption (teacher bribery, copying, plagiarism). Corruption is spoken of informally, ‘around the corners’ or in the media (in recent years there have been reported cases of ministers who have plagiarized their doctoral theses), but there are no empirical studies on the extent of copying, plagiarism and bribery (Glendinning, Michałowska-Dutkiewicz, & Jozwik, 2014). The long-term impact is very destructive, affecting work ethics (Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009). In spite of numerous complaints over the past twenty five years about the ethical issues of Romanian higher education, ‘the voice of academics’ has made itself heard too seldom. More often than not, it has been covered by other voices: the voice of journalists, the voice of politicians and of the general public. Faced with outside attacks, universities have closed themselves, this behaviour being specific to any system (Neculau, 1996). In this study, we propose a necessary recovery of the ‘voice of academics’, who have often been accused of premeditated retirement in the ‘ivory tower’ (Robinson & Moulton 2005).

We have synthesized two categories of factors that affect the moral climate in universities: personal factors and organizational factors. The category of personal factors includes: the different values of the actors involved (teachers, students, researchers), the objectives they set for themselves and their perceptions of acceptable behaviours. The organizational factors include: (a) Increasing pressures for efficiency (Kogan, 2007) and increased controls over academic tasks (Musselin, 2007). In response to that pressure, people may engage in ‘questionable behaviour’ (Kirrane, 1990). (b) Marketization, understood as the use of competition to attract students by means of aggressive marketing strategies; (c) Massification of admission to faculties and massification of research, which entails a deterioration in the quality of academic activity (Welch, 2005; Vincent-Lancrin, 2006).

From a historical point of view, from 1945 to 1989 Romania experienced ‘a pure and hard communism’ (Birzea, 1995 p.2). Since the fall of the totalitarian regime, there has begun the reconstruction of society, first and foremost on an axiological level. The process of shifting to the democratic regime has been called ‘transition’. Practically, it means switching from egalitarian and passive working mentalities to active, competition-based and responsibility-taking mentalities (Nicolescu, 2002). This is not a simple process for universities that had been strongly subjected to the old regime as vehicles of political formation steered by the dominant doctrine of Marxism-Leninism (Pierson & Odsliv, 2012). We present, within the limited space of our paper, some peculiarities of higher education during the period that has left us with ‘sad memories’: the lowest number of students in Europe due to planned demand from the labour market; elitism and extremely rigorous admission exams, which only long-time trainees were passing; unique curricula for the same academic specialization and unique admission procedures for all universities (Nicolescu, 2002); the abolition of social science faculties (psychology, philosophy, sociology, political sciences) and emphasis on polytechnic domains and engineering, useful for the development of industry; textbooks and teaching strongly indoctrinated in the humanities; research contaminated by political and intellectual servility (Sadlak, 1994). In the post-communist period,

academic structures have acquired certain particularities, namely atomization, circularity and formalism, anomy (Stănciulescu, 2002).

2. Problem Statement

In this exploratory study, we focused our attention on the ethical dilemmas faced by Romanian academics from a representative public university (totalling more than 23.000 students and 700 teachers). In national charts, it is consistently ranked among the three top positions. We have researched the dilemmas of two categories of academics: seniors, who have conducted their teaching career both in the communist and post-communist era, and junior academics who have ‘experienced’ a different political, cultural and economic climate. The central concept of our research is the ethical dilemma as a conflict of moral values (Trevino, 1986; Kirby, Paradise, & Protti, 1992; Kidder, 1995).

The motivations and context of this study are both theoretical and social. Keith-Speigel and Carr (1993) claimed that the research on ethical dilemmas faced by the teaching staff at university level are rare and much more attention to ethics and ethical dilemmas is needed in our universities. Since then, there have been numerous studies related to the dilemmas of some areas, such as medical ethics, but not to the dilemmas of academics in general. Hamilton (2002) and Klein (2005) warned about the lack of formal instruction in ethics for professors. Another strong reason is the fact that from a social point of view, the professional conduct of the members of the academic community is a special concern of the general public.

The impact of this study is related to several plans: 1. for the academic world in general, in order to increase the knowledge base about Romanian universities; 2. for trainers responsible with the initial training of researchers and prospective university staff. Some of the graduates end up teaching in universities without knowing the professional (moral, didactic, managerial) exigencies that such a role-status involves. 3. for graduates of master and doctoral studies who work or will work in the academic environment; these will be able to find out about the ‘troubles’ of those who have been working in the ‘branch’ for more or less time.

3. Research Questions

Research explicitly focused on ethics in Romanian universities is low, and the ethical dilemmas of Romanian academics have been approached in a theoretical manner (Iorga, 2008). In 2005, there was conducted the sociological research ‘Ethics in Universities’(Miroiu, Bulai, Cutaș, Ion, & Andreescu, 2005), involving a representative sample at the national level. The central objective of the study was to investigate teachers’ ethical dilemmas from a diachronic perspective. The research questions were: 1. What are ‘the critical ethical dilemmas’ that concern the academic staff? 2. What differences and confluences are there between ‘the voice of juniors’ and ‘the voice of seniors’?

5.1. Participants

The subjects were ten academics, namely five seniors, knowledgeable about the academic environment of the 1970s and 1980s, and five junior representatives of the ‘new academic wave’. Teacher selection has been made according to certain criteria, such as the teaching subject and years of

experience. Those with up to 10 years of teaching in the academic environment have been called juniors, those with more than twenty years of teaching, seniors. In order to properly address the phenomenon, it was important to achieve representativeness for the entire university. That is why the sample included eight subjects in the real field (Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Computer Science), eight subjects in the socio-human field, two subjects from Economy and two from Letters. By gender, we had 4 female subjects and 6 male subject

4. Purpose of the Study

Specifically, the objectives of the study were: (a) Categorizing critical ethical dilemmas according to their themes; (b) Comparing ‘the voice of juniors’ with ‘the voice of seniors’. The concept of ‘critical cases’ has been taken up with the meaning given by Flyvbjerg (2001, p.79): a case that leads to the achievement of information that enables logical deduction of the type “if this is (not) valid for this case then it applies to all (no) cases”.

5. Research Methods

The method used was a semi-structured interview, for which we have also elaborated two interview schedules: one for seniors and the other for juniors. In the interview schedules, we suggested some thematic fields for dilemmas: teaching processes (teaching design, teaching and student assessment), professional relationships, educational management. The operational definition we have used in the study is the following: “the ethical dilemma is a conflict between two equally valid duties (Mureșan, 2010). During the interviews, senior teachers were asked to provide descriptions of ethical dilemmas in the workplace, dilemmas they faced during the communist era, and dilemmas they face today. The juniors were supposed to name the dilemmas of the years of teaching already experienced. We highlight the fact that in Romania there have been neither any professional ethics courses for academics, nor courses aimed at research ethics. Ethical notions are assimilated informally, with certain risks. We did not intend to explicitly introduce into the interview schedule notions such as academic freedom or freedom of expression, as not all academics have the same background representations for these.

5.1. Data collection and analysis

The data was collected between October 2014 and February 2015. All interviews were conducted by the author. Teachers were informed via e-mail about the research when they received an invitation to participate in the study along with a definition of ethical dilemma and some landmarks to help them formulate the answers (a kind of *aide-memoire*, Burgess, 1985). Not all of those invited followed the invitation, so the researcher had to adapt to the situation. The interviews were scheduled in advance, being conducted in turn, with each respondent separately. The average length of an interview was 45 minutes. The interviews were tape-recorded and the transcribed data was analysed using coding methods (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Content analysis was used for data processing. Several successive readings were conducted in order to capture ‘critical dilemmas’.

6. Findings

The following ‘critical dilemmas’ emerged from the data obtained through interviews.

6.1. Freedom/moral courage vs. conformity

The first critical ethical dilemma, shared by both historical periods (communist and post-communist), is related to freedom in the hypostases of freedom of speech and freedom of research. Freedom is a fundamental value, whose threat affects the fulfilment of all categories of responsibilities: pedagogical, research, managerial. For the communist period, the dilemma of freedom of speech is presented by the respondents as follows: “...regarding certain ideas, I wanted to say one thing but actually said something else. We were trying to hide our true convictions ... “ (senior respondent). “*Shall I keep silent or shall I ask the question? Shall I reveal or not the deviation from science for the sake of ideology*”? (senior respondent).

Regarding freedom of teaching or freedom of research there were surprising answers as well: “*There was no curriculum censorship in the 70s and 80s, as we were circulating scientific content. There was no ideological tension to impose the subjects to be taught (unlike in the 50s, the most severe period)*” (senior respondent). “*Even if the doctoral theme was forbidden, I found ways to treat it with sufficient intellectual honesty*” (senior respondent). These answers are very intriguing if we think about the context they are referring to. How is it possible for teachers to have ‘the feeling of freedom’ in a time of censorship? We have found several explanations for this phenomenon: by comparison with the previous period (the 50s, very strongly censored), teachers experienced a sense of liberation, and each of them tried to build ‘a perimeter of freedom’ on his/her own scientific territory. The little freedom gained meant so much that it was felt like a big gain. A second explanation relates to the ‘glorification of the past’, specific to elderly people who remember the period of their youth.

For the post-communist period, there is no evocation of freedom of research violation. There is no censorship, but there is a symptomatic lack of repairing response from institutional leaders when deviations are highlighted. “*Do I accept the implicit/explicit limits imposed on freedom of speech or do I break them? Sometimes yes, sometimes no, depending on the reasoning provided by the administration. Sometimes I publicly criticized colleagues or initiatives considered at that time to be inappropriate*” (junior respondent).

From all the exposed situations it results that academics, be they seniors or juniors, experience an acute sense of discomfort as a result of the tension of having one’s problems publicly exposed, without the presence of a repairing institutional response. But transparency is not enough (Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010), other societal and institutional levers are needed. The analysis conducted by Karran (2009) shows that Romania is among the countries that have joined The UNESCO Recommendation on institutional autonomy, individual academic freedom, self-governance and collegiality; therefore, objectively speaking, there exists the legal basis for things to be done fairly, but this does not actually happen in reality. Several explanations are possible regarding the absence of repairing responses: the university environment reflects to a great extent ‘the ethics of interpersonal relationships’ (Heintz, 2006), which is profoundly subjective, instead of the principled professional ethics.

6.2. Loyalty and collegiality dilemmas. To whom should you be loyal?

A second critical ethical dilemma concerns the conflict between the values of honesty and that of loyalty ('Do I obey regulations or defend my colleague/colleagues? Should I be loyal to students or to my colleagues?') We may call them 'loyalty dilemmas' or 'peer dilemmas'. These dilemmas are equally found in the communist and post-communist era: *"How do we solve the dilemma between the need to be a good colleague versus the betrayal of students' trust? In a situation where a colleague came across in a very negative light in front of the students I chose not to betray my colleague"* (senior respondent). *"We found, at some point, certain deviations of a colleague of mine. I was in the position of choosing whether to make the situation public or to keep everything private, personal"* (senior respondent). 'Peer loyalty' is the catalyst for the most difficult ethical dilemmas that confront teachers. Research results indicate that peer conflicts are the most difficult to solve and usually remain unsolved (Campbell, 1996; Tirri, 1999; Colnerud 2006.) The role of colleagues in imparting ethical conduct to organizations should not be underestimated. Unethical behaviour is influenced by a variety of contextual factors, among which peer-behaviour plays an essential role (McCabe & Trevino, 1997). For Hargreaves (1992) 'balkanisation' is a form of teacher culture consisting of groups that compete for power, status and resources, depending on loyalty and the structure of departments. These cultures are mainly present at informal, implicit, and temporary level, with some moments of pressure in 'optimal' periods. 'The political game behind the scenes', a phenomenon that exists in any institution, affects teaching positions less and, above all, the establishment of administrative hierarchies.

6.3. Good teacher, good assessor

The third category of critical ethical dilemmas is related to the pedagogical problems faced by teachers. There emerge the themes of the curriculum, the pedagogical relation with the students, the use of the modern teaching technologies under the circumstances of the massification of university education and of the fundamental change of the student profile. Examples of dilemmas: *"To what extent do we use modern technologies (telephony, internet) in the teaching activity? They contribute to the superficiality of academic activity, but students like them"* (senior respondent). *"How should we get to know the current student? What kind of approaches to knowing students are appropriate for this age? How should we design the curriculum, if we do not know the student's background? How can we know the student's background if we do not enter the student's private space? Is not the entry into privacy an intrusion at this age? How do we prepare him for the profession if we do not really know him?"* (senior respondent). By far, the topic of evaluation includes the most numerous category of pedagogical dilemmas. There may be highlighted several sensitive situations, with different themes: ensuring the objectivity of the evaluation, relevance of the assessment in relation to economic issues; eliminating exam frauds; relevance of the assessment in relation to economic issues (*"Do the marks that we give matter? How can I motivate students when I know they will not find jobs? An exceptional former student of mine works as a bread stallholder"*, junior respondent). Some senior teachers experience a sense of frustration because of the degradation of the quality of higher education today, at all levels - bachelor, master, doctorate - compared to what it used to be: *"One position for a doctoral candidate once every 2-3 years, 10-20 candidates*

competing for that position. Now most of them have a Doctorate qualifier ‘very good’, which cannot be true” (senior respondent).

6.4. Voices in contrast – the voice of juniors and the voice of seniors

Our research has revealed obvious differences between seniors and juniors. Thus, seniors are more critical, have managerial experience, ‘crop’ the dilemmas more easily, are daring in their statements. Many studies argue that the leadership experience is fundamental to understanding the context of dilemmas (Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimbe,r 2006; Roche 1997; Eyal, Berkovich, & Schwartz 2011). Unlike them, juniors do not openly state problems, referring only to their own work, they are shier in their assertions and uncertain about situations. Other Romanian sociologists have also sensed the fear of young people in expressing their thoughts freely in a formal setting, keeping a moral and prudent anonymity. Thus, Stănculescu (2002, pp. 21-22) states: “As a result of the anonymous and obedient experiences reiterated throughout an entire biography, the individual (especially the young one) does not have the necessary interaction skills to manage his/her own resources and organize his/her actions in an effective manner”. On the other hand, how could an apprentice-disciple who owes his/her position to ‘a founding father’ not recognize his voice? The mentor-protégé relationship is very asymmetrical, and can “compel conformity, suppress dissent, and curb professional growth” (Oglensky, 2008, p. 419). Any reaction from the novice may be interpreted as “an attack on the founders” (Sirota, 2003). Another circulated explanation could be related to the fact that Romanian university students are very much involved in the achievement of the teaching norms, much more loaded than in the communist period (Cosmovici, 1997; Stan & Stan, 1997). After many hours spent on didactic roles (in order to get somewhat very low wages), juniors feel unable to react, eventually to manage conflicts about things going on in their institution. Especially among the seniors there were very critical voices, who have thoroughly spoken about the serious ethical issues in Romania.

As the fundamental difference between the answers of seniors and juniors, we mention the availability of the former ones to refer to aspects related to their faculty policy and even to that of higher education in Romania, unlike juniors, who refer only to their own person and to their own work, by no means ‘sliding’ towards ‘sensitive’ topics. Seniors refer to other people in their speech, unlike juniors. Symptomatically, all the dilemmas about collegiality and loyalty belong to seniors. No junior reported anything about other persons, but only about him/herself. The dilemmas common to seniors and juniors are those in the area of student assessment and research. In fact, a single junior reported a situation with an administrative-managerial dilemma. At the opposite end, one senior referred to his didactic and research dilemmas, avoiding to mention dilemmas about faculty and university politics. How can these results be explained? The status of novice versus expert in the field (depending on the hierarchy of university degrees), together with the managerial experience (which any senior inevitably accumulates) are decisive variables that influence the freedom of speech on a delicate topic such as ethical dilemmas.

7. Conclusion

Given the difficult period from the axiological and economic point of view that the entire world is going through, universities are not free from moral disturbance. Moral problems are even exacerbated when institutions face economic difficulties (Madsen, 2009).

In this study, we explored a part of the institutional culture of a large university in Romania, namely the ethical dilemmas faced by the employed academics, according to the age criterion. The revealed ethical dilemmas highlight the complexity of the academic role, with its multiple constraints.

A first conclusion of our study highlights the fact that academics encountered during the communist era and are still facing dilemmas on several levels: at the level of general human values (liberty, courage, honesty) and dilemmas at the level of teaching. We can systematize two types of conflicts for the communist period. A first type of conflict is that between appearances and reality, between the facade presented and the manifestations in the social context. The second type is the conflict between personal, individual values (freedom, the desire to take action and think freely, without constraints) and the social values promoted (formal, abstract, restricting values).

The second conclusion, drawn in the light of the respondents' answers (with this limited sample), signals a very novel aspect with many implications, namely the fact that the 'voices' of senior and junior academics are fundamentally different. Seniors are critical and courageous in their answers, juniors are very cautious. Obviously, the 'weak' voice of juniors has causes, explanations and consequences. What clearly results from our study is the fact that the 'language' spoken by seniors has minimal connections with that of juniors. The repertoires of the two categories have few intersection areas. It is relevant the fact that an important professional segment (juniors) has an accentuated 'symptom of silence' in connection with a series of themes that are very important for another professional segment in the same branch - the seniors.

The dilemmas common to both categories of respondents (seniors and juniors) include dilemmas about evaluation, first and foremost, and dilemmas about teaching (related to teaching methods and content). The most common dilemmas are those related to evaluation. As a consequence of these results, we support the building of a solid psycho-pedagogic culture of academics, taking into account the demands of professional roles. As the results show, no teacher, either senior or junior, is 'exempt' from delicate situations that are strictly related to the essence of the teaching profession: how do they teach, what methods to choose, how to proceed with evaluation, etc.? Despite the marginal presence of psycho-pedagogical training in the Romanian university curriculum, it is of imperative necessity. The study highlights insoluble, complicated problems, but also some solvable issues that can be prevented or even diminished by means of good initial and continuous training. Other authors also reiterate the stringency of a university pedagogy (Hativa 2001; D'Andrea & Gosling 2005) and a teaching ethics (Robinson & Moulton, 2005).

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