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The appropriation of the academic environment and the social network as academic success factors – a trans-cultural study

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Abstract

This trans-cultural research aims at identifying the relations between the appropriation of the academic environment and the faculty social network, on the one hand and the students' academic success, on the other hand. The sample consisted of 102 Romanian students, and 152 French students. The findings show that the appropriation of the academic environment is associated with the students' academic success only in Romania, both globally and at the level of its components. The size of the social network built during college is not related to academic success for any of the samples.

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1. Problem statement

Since the International Psychology Conference on Space Appropriation held in 1976 in Strasbourg, space appropriation became a topic of interest for researchers in numerous countries: Moles & Rohmer (1976) and Fisher (1989, 1997) in France, Moreno (1992) and Pol and Moreno (1992) in Spain, Korosec-Serfaty, Decker, Levy and Tramani (1976), Morval and Judge (2000), Morval and Corbiere (2000) in Canada. The central definition of the conceptual frame of the current study states that space appropriation is a specific behaviour scheme, developed by

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the individual in his/her relation with the environment, destined to help him dominate the environment and avoid being dominated by it (Moles & Rohmer, 1976). By using this cognitive and affective mechanism, the individual invests space with intentions and acts, due to which he escapes routine and builds his identity.

Admission to higher-education is done in many European countries (including Romania) based exclusively on the secondary education graduation diploma (Lafontaine & Terwangne, 1993). At least two phenomena are constantly met in Romania in the last decade: the trimming of the number of students who graduate from the first year to the second year of study and the decrease in the interest of those who do graduate for the professional activity. The Romanian students seem to have a poorer and poorer professional identity, the main perceived characteristic of the university being that of a source of the degree which shall allow easier access to a job (Paunescu, Vlasceanu, & Miroiu, 2011).

During the last 15 years research has been conducted which identified more groups of variables involved in academic success at European level: the socio-demographic characteristics of the students (Danner, 1999), the academic context (Felouzis, Abadie & Andrieu, 1998), and the living standards of the students (Boujut & Bruchon Schweitzer, 2007).

The start of the academic studies is a transition which sometimes painfully impacts the student, due to the fact that he leaves a familiar, secure environment in order to integrate and adapt to a new environment, with a different lifestyle. A process of space detachment and reattachment takes place (Altman & Low, 1992), which can be considered an indicator of adapting to the new space (Rioux, 2004), and this impacts the professional activity alike (Barbillon, Moch & Rioux, 2006). There is relatively little research done on the relation between the student and the environment in general and the academic environment in particular (Félonneau, 1994; Morval & Judge, 2000; Ratiu, 1997). The mentioned researchers concentrate on the space appropriation mechanisms, but focus less on the consequences of space appropriation on the academic success of the students.

2. Purpose of study

This transcultural research aims at analysing the relations between the appropriation of the academic environment, the students' academic success and the size of the social network for the Romanian and French students. Our hypotheses are:

- H1. The academic success of the students is positively associated to the appropriation of the academic environment.
- H2. The larger the social academic network of the students, the more intense the appropriation of the academic environment is.
- H3. The social network in the academic environment is connected to the level of academic success.

3. Research methods

3.1. Sample

The participants were 103 undergraduate students from a Romanian university (91.2% female, 8.8% male), and 152 students from a French university (60.5% female, 39.5% male).

3.2. Tools

The participants answered a questionnaire on the evaluation of certain socio-demographic (gender, age, type of habitation), individual (social network inside the faculty) and psycho-sociological (the appropriation of the academic environment) variables. The academic results were collected at the end of the academic year.

In order to assess the size of the social network inside the faculty, the students were asked to answer the following item: 'how many friends do you have inside the faculty?' The possible answers were none, only one, between two and five friends, more than five friends.

The scale of space appropriation was adapted for the academic environment by Rioux (2004), using the Morval and Judge (2000) questionnaire on the appropriation of the working environment. The scale was afterwards

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