

## **Cultural Diversity in People's Attitudes and Perceptions**

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# Cultural Diversity in People's Attitudes and Perceptions

## Summary

This paper shares the approach of social constructivism, and maintains that diversity should be examined not 'par excellence', as an entity in itself, but as reflected in people's minds and expressed in their attitudes and perceptions. On the basis of an empirical Bulgarian-Finnish intercultural research the paper states that diversity is not essential, given and unproblematic. Rather, it undergoes constant evolution. What is considered now 'different' can in future be seen as more or less 'similar'. The informants characterized people with a religious, ethnic or racial background, other than theirs, as 'distant' and 'different', while people belonging to groups with the same origin were designated as 'similar' and 'close'. This means that cultural diversity can also be translated into a social-psychological distance. Thus diversity is context-bound and cultural groups are always seen and appraised from the perspective of one's own particular cultural paradigm.

**Keywords:** Diversity, 'Self', 'Other', Attitudes, Perceptions

**JEL Classification:** Z, Z19

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This paper shares the approach of social constructivism, and maintains that diversity should be examined not 'par excellence', as an entity in itself, but as reflected in people's minds and expressed in their attitudes and perceptions. According to the social constructivism, not the cultural community itself but its image, continuously constructed, shaped and reshaped by individuals, becomes the basis of the collective identification with it.

In the literature on cultural models and identities diversity is often measured by a selection of basic cultural characteristics, such as individualism/collectivism, high/low context, time orientation, masculinity/femininity, etc. (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997). Cultural groups, ethnicities and especially nationalities are described and mapped by attributing indexes of the given characteristic to them. This is also very often done by means of empirical investigations.

One similar survey was done in the spring of the year 2004, when 200 Bulgarian and 200 Finnish university students were interviewed by questionnaires about the way they perceive their ethnic, national and cultural 'others' (Petkova & Lehtonen 2005). The questionnaire consisted of both closed and open-ended questions. Analysing the data received, the paper will discuss theoretical and methodological problems in measuring people's perceptions of cultural diversity.

### **Diversity and 'otherness'**

The modernist approach to cultural communities, the so-called 'essentialist' or 'primordialist' approach (Deloche 1860), views them as 'natural', 'essential' or 'primordial' products. Nowadays social constructivism challenges the modernist ideas of culture and cultural identities. It denies the existence of primordial or innate features of cultural communities and accepts them as a social construct. Nations and sometimes even ethnicities are presented as the result of conscious and deliberate social engineering (Kedourie 1960: 1; Gellner 1983: 48; Eller 1999). 'Imagined communities' (Anderson 1983) and 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) have become widespread notions in relation to national communities at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through empirical studies Bechhoffer et al. (1999: 520) for example prove that individuals make different national identity claims in different contexts and that they consciously articulate how their claims have changed over time and space.

The idea of the cultural community as an image is emphasized by the discourse approach too. Scholars, accordingly, perceive the nation as a text and a message to be conveyed. The nation is, thus, considered to be more a symbolic form than a social reality. For example, Bhabha (1990: 1-2) states that the nation comes into being as a cultural signification, as a representation of social life rather than as a discipline of social polity. From this point of view the nation is a

narrative, a story written or told and a message shared by and transmitted among the members of a given community.

Both social constructivism and the discourse approach describe cultural communities in relation to and often in opposition to other cultural communities. The relationship 'self'-'other' is considered to be the basic mechanism of identity construction and the main indicator of cultural diversity. The 'other' could be perceived as ethnic, national, racial, cultural, social or civilizational 'other'. Freud (1985) was the first to postulate that collective identity is established on the dual principle 'own – alien', where the opposition is both consciously and unconsciously constructed. The logic of this dual thinking could be found in the feeling of security provided by the group and in the desire to differentiate oneself from all the others outside the group. This differentiation varies from understanding and tolerance to hostility and even hatred towards 'others'.

This ambivalence of the human identification process is inherent. The 'self' cannot have an image or a face without the 'other', and in fact all his/her characteristics are perceived, analysed and esteemed in comparison to the characteristics of the 'other'. Not only individuals but also groups need the 'other' to affirm what they perceive is typically and uniquely theirs. The opposition 'self'-'others' highlights contemporary national identities and images too. Even today nationalism is understood as an intermingling of the three major discourses: 'self', 'other' and 'the world' (Delanty 1999).

Hence, the basic means of measuring cultural diversity is the comparison. By comparing with 'others' both communities and individuals become aware not only of who and what they are but who and what they are not. Comparison, affirmation and negation are important means of shaping cultural identity, and are also expressed in articulated positive or negative statements. For example, both Finns and Swedes are highly aware that they are Nordic communities. The main attributes of their culture are very often perceived and analyzed in comparison with the characteristics thought to be typical of Southern people. In this respect the cultural autostereotypes of Northern Europeans are based on a contrast with Southern Europeans. The first are thought to be well organized, silent and reserved while the second, on the contrary, are often considered to be non-organized, social and loud.

Thus current research in cultural diversity has been focused on social and cultural stereotypes too. It is considered that all nationalities share some stereotypes (beliefs about certain personality characteristics that other social, ethnic or national communities possess) and autostereotypes (the characteristics thought to be typical of the one's own community). Some of the stereotypes can be rather harmful because they may arouse hostility, xenophobia and racism. The autostereotypes, too, may be used as a self-handicapping strategy. This usually occurs when social groups or collectives feel threatened and less tolerated by other cultures. In this case thinking negatively for oneself is

designed to reduce the responsibility for a potential failure (Lehtonen 2005: 79-82). An important strategy to establish intercultural dialogue hence is to reduce the negative (auto) stereotypes of the given nationality and to promote positive messages about one's own community (Giffard & Rivenburgh 2000: 11).

From this point of view measuring cultural diversity implies to study both the self-concept of a given cultural group and its attitudes towards non-members. At the same time despite being rather stable, perceptions of difference and 'otherness' are not permanent but can shift. They are highly dependent on the cultural context.

Hall defines cultural context as 'a highly selective screen between man and the outside world. It designates what we pay attention to and what we ignore' (Hall, 1991: 46). Cultural context consists of material elements and of codes that are given a certain meaning. Without knowing the possible meanings of a code we cannot understand a culture. It is the same as being able to read a given alphabet. For instance, Chinese letters are merely hieroglyphs or small pictographs for many Europeans, while for the Chinese they carry information. For a European or an American a Zulu necklace is just a necklace, but for the Zulu himself it is a talisman that carries magical power. For a Muslim a cross may have no significance at all, but for a Christian it is the symbol of his faith. Thus cultural identity is always situated in a given cultural context and what does not correspond to the context is often considered to be 'different', 'strange', and 'non-understandable'.

Cultural context is always shaped by economic, political and social processes. For example, in the past Europe was thought of as divided into two basic regions: Western and Eastern Europe. This division functioned as a basic mechanism of construction of collective identities. People from the East were considered to be 'different' by the Western people. The Eastern Europeans represented the cultural and social 'other' for the West, and vice versa. After the collapse of the socialist block and the intensive political unification into a common European Union this division is already artificial. Nowadays it is more ideological and political remnants of the past than real cultural patterns.

According to Said (1991: 1) in order to affirm its own cultural difference, uniqueness and achievements, the West has always needed an antipode. Because in the process of the European integration the opposition between the East and West of the continent is progressively erasing, Europe as a whole may find the cultural 'other' in the Middle East and the Muslim countries or in the Far East, India, China and Japan.

From the examples given above it is evident that perceptions of cultural diversity are both learned and continuously changing. Some values, customs, traditions and even attitudes are passed from generation to generation over the centuries, while other elements of the material and spiritual culture undergo quick changes. Nowadays cultural communities and cultural identities are strongly influenced by the process of globalization. The mono-cultural context

inherited from the previous eras is now being transformed into a multi-cultural and intercultural context of pluralism. The shift in the paradigm of the cultural context inevitably affects the perceptions of cultural difference too.

Thus it seems that diversity can never be designated as ‘given’ and ‘essential’. What is considered today ‘different’ may in the future be perceived as more or less ‘similar’, and vice versa. Images of diversity are mental constructs, varying according to the different cultural context and serving as basic mechanisms of identity construction.

In comparing the answers of the Bulgarian and Finnish students, the paper will discuss how mental images of difference and ‘others’ are generated in the minds of the respondents.

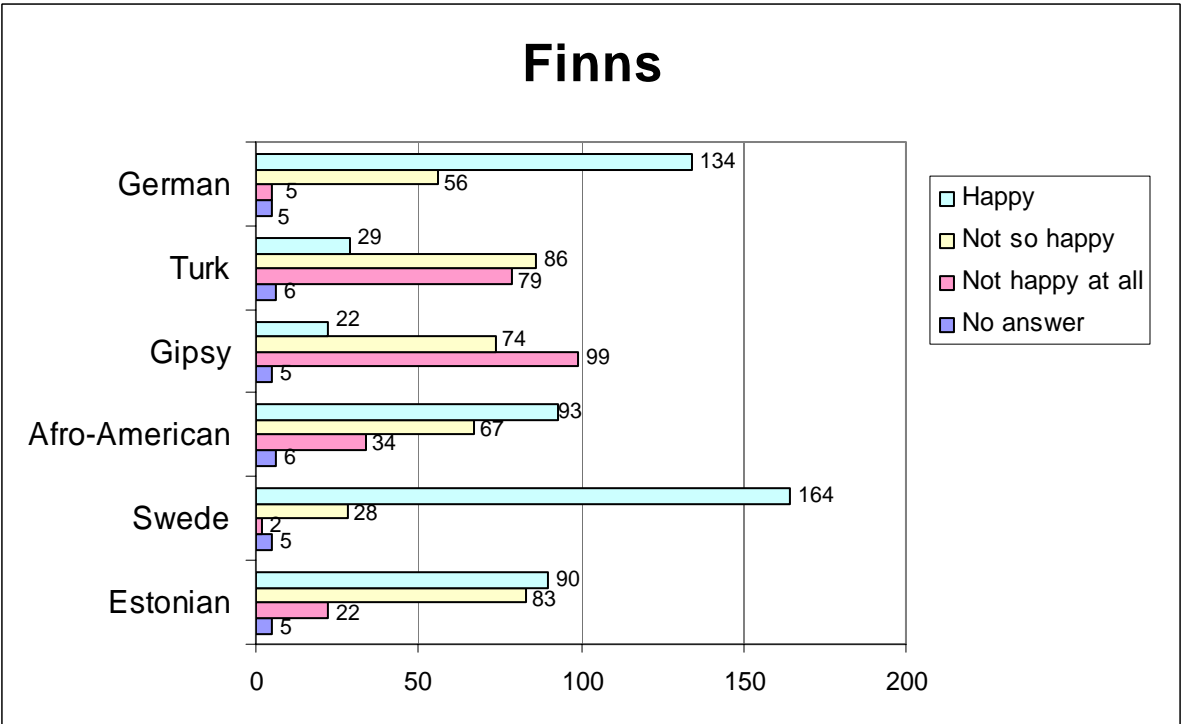
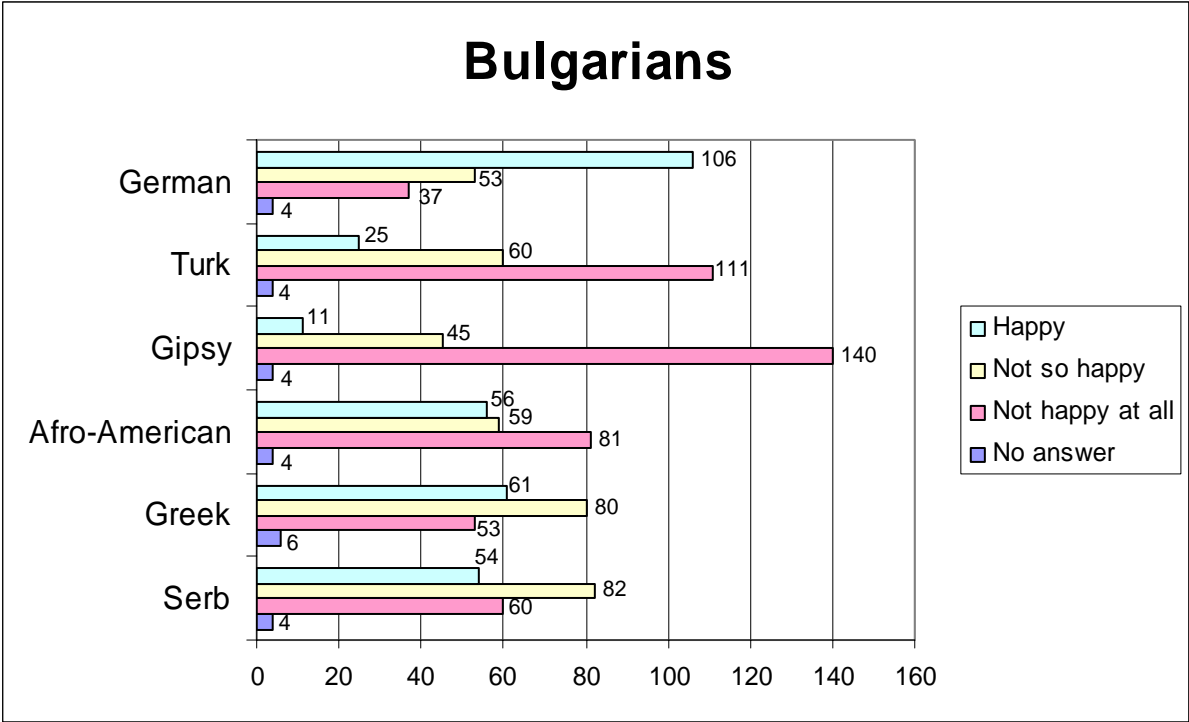
### **Bulgarian and Finnish perceptions of ‘other’**

The Bulgarian and Finnish respondents were asked about their attitudes to specific nationalities and ethnicities, such as Russians, Americans, Germans, Turks, etc. In this way we hoped to find out what factors contribute directly first, to the collective self-awareness of the members of a nation, and second, to the manner in which the cultural ‘other’ is perceived and evaluated.

One of the questions asked whether the students would like themselves to marry or to see a close relative of theirs marrying a representative of given nationalities or ethnic groups. The nationalities and ethnicities chosen were for the Finns: German, Turkish, Swedish, Estonian, Gypsy and Afro-American, for the Bulgarians they were German, Turkish, Serbian, Greek, Gypsy and Afro-American. We consciously chose more distant and neighbouring nationalities as well as ethnic minorities represented in the two countries. The informants had to tick as many of the above-presented options as they wished. At the same time they also had to choose from three alternatives on a different scale, i.e., happy to, not so happy, not at all.

Fig. 1

Willingness to marry a member of another nationality or ethnicity



Both the Finns and the Bulgarians ticked the Gipsies and the Turks as the least popular ethnic groups to marry with, but did not show such an unwillingness to marry an Afro-American. The latter may appear rather paradoxical. There could be different reasons for the lack of congruence between the respondents' opinions about Afro-Americans, on the one hand, and Gypsies and Turks, on the other. One possible explanation is the difference in

familiarity with these two groups. Afro-Americans live in a culture far away from both Bulgaria and Finland; there are no direct daily contacts between them and the Bulgarians/ Finns but they have learned a lot about the history of slavery in North America. This is why the answers may be indication of a willingness to show empathy and benevolence towards this distant racial group.

Gypsies are an ethnic minority in both Bulgaria and Finland. In both countries they stick to their specific way of life, cultural traditions and customs, and thus represent a community that is unwilling to adapt to the way of life of the culture of the majority in Bulgaria and Finland. Thus Gypsies are perceived as a rather different and alien cultural group of both the Bulgarians and the Finns.

The reasons for the Bulgarians' and the Finns' suspiciousness towards Turks may have different roots: the Bulgarian distrust may be based on the negative collective memory of oppression, experienced in the past, while the Finns' tendency to turn down friendships with Turks may origin from negative news in the media.

One explanation in common for the Bulgarians' and Finns' unwillingness to make friends with Turks could be found in the Turks' non-Christian religion. For both the Bulgarians and Finns Turkey and the Turks are not only a national and ethnic but also a religious 'other'. A proof of this assumption can be found in the answers given to the open ended questions too. Only 20,2% of the words used by Bulgarians to characterize Turks were positive, 45,3% were negative and 34,5% neutral. The most common attributes used to describe Turks were: 'strongly religious' and 'fanatics' (78). The Finns' characterizations of Turks were similar: 16,2% positive, 38% negative and 45.8% neutral. The Turks were described by the Finns as: 'passionate', 'temperamental' (37); but also as 'threatening', 'dangerous', 'hostile' (27); 'slick', 'deceitful', 'dishonest' (25); 'macho', 'chauvinist' (23).

Obviously the respondents connect with the difference in religion and different cultural models, dissimilar attitudes and even different behaviour in certain social situations, which makes them relate to the Turks with a certain reserve. One needs much knowledge and understanding of the 'other' culture in order to surmount the prejudices accumulated over the ages. Even if some stereotypes and prejudices are suppressed or restrained, when it comes to one of the most intimate events in human life, marriage, they can no longer be ignored.

The three groups, Gypsies, Turks and Afro-Americans, have distinct cultural differences from the social groups of Bulgarians and Finns and thus ethnicity and religion become the basic characteristics on which the idea of 'otherness' is constructed. It is obvious that the perception of 'difference' can be based on several dissimilarities between cultural groups: racial, ethnic, and religious but also political and ideological. This means that ethnic, racial and religious differences still arouse negative attitudes or prejudices, protection mechanisms, by means of which one can affirm the priority of one's own culture



over other cultures, perceived as a threat because of their difference from one's own. Despite the willingness to establish friendships with a different – and distant – ethnic group, both the Bulgarians and Finns expressed some prejudices against the cultural 'other'. However, if the 'other' is distant enough, no matter how different it may be, it is not perceived as a threat and it does not trigger the same identity protective attitudes. This is the case with the Afro-American culture in the present data.

Also, in the open-ended questions both the Bulgarian and the Finnish university students characterized people with a religious, ethnic or racial background, other than theirs, as 'distant' and 'different', while people belonging to some neighbouring countries or to groups with the same origin were designated as 'similar' and 'close'. For example, 49% of the Bulgarians' descriptions of Russians were classified as positive, 26% as negative and 24,8% as neutral. Among the most common attributes that the Bulgarians connected with the Russians were: 'good-hearted' (60), 'alcoholics', 'drink too much alcohol' (58) 'our Slavonic brothers', 'close', 'similar to us', 'Slavonic friends' (21). At the same time the Finns' descriptions of the Russians included 20,6% positive, 47,7% negative and 31% neutral. The attributes most often repeated in the Finns' replies were: 'untrustworthy', 'irresponsible', 'dishonest' (56); 'cheerful', 'hospitable', 'friendly', 'sociable' (34); 'poor' (24), 'lazy' (18), 'criminals', 'thieves' (15).

Thus the Finnish and Bulgarian images of one and the same target nation, Russia and the Russians, were diametrically opposed. In such a way a very important question comes to the fore: does the image of a nation correspond to social reality and what are the factors that contribute to its establishment?

The obvious reason for the Finns negative image is in the historical rivalry and the hardships that Finland has experienced in its relations with Russia. Similarly, the positive image of Russia among Bulgarians has its explanation in history: in the course of Bulgarian history the Russians have been liberators and supporters of Bulgaria. This fact, together with a common Slavonic origin, the closeness of the languages spoken, as well as cultural similarities, form the foundation for the Bulgarian image of Russia.

From the comparison above it is obvious that the image of a nation or a cultural group is always shaped from a particular perspective. More concretely, there are two main factors that contribute to the forging of an image. Firstly, the history of mutual relations turns out to be the foundation on which the images of social and cultural groups are built. And secondly, it is the proximity with the nation in question, either geographical or cultural, that is considered important by the people appraising it. In this relation the culture of the target is always valued from the perspective of one's own cultural model.

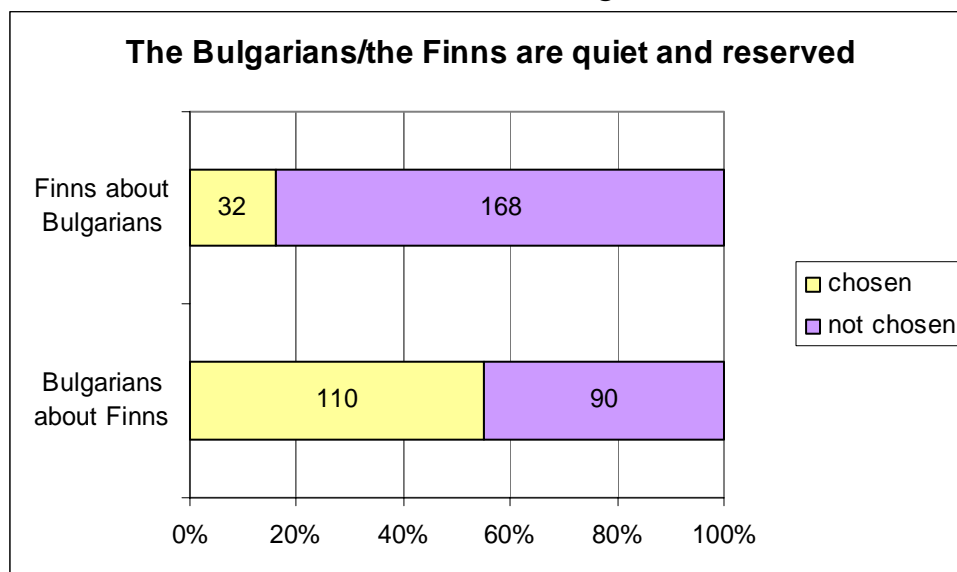
The perceptions of 'similarity' and 'difference' are also based on stereotypical generalizations. They derive from particular cultural context and are related to characteristics of the observers' own culture. This explains why

cultural characteristics are always relative: the representatives of a given nation may be seen as ‘good-hearted’ and ‘brothers’ by one culture and as ‘non-reliable’ and ‘criminals’ by another, according to the informants’ culture.

This principle is proved in the mutual assessment of the Bulgarians and Finns too. One of the questions was concretely related to the reciprocal perceptions of the sociability, national characteristics, and value orientation of Finns and Bulgarians. This question was structured and the Bulgarian and Finnish students had to select one or more of different alternatives. We listed some stereotypical options that had been found used to describe Bulgarians/Finns in earlier studies.

32 (16%) Finns and 90 (45%) Bulgarians chose the option: ‘Bulgarians/Finns are quiet and reserved’ against 168 Finns and 110 Bulgarians who did not. Also, the Bulgarians’ free associations of Finns underlined their ‘non-sociable’ and ‘reserved’ character, while many of the Finnish students stated that the Bulgarians are ‘lively’ and ‘sociable’. Silence is typically assumed to be a characteristic of the Northern and talkativeness of the Southern culture. This is also confirmed by the empirical data of the Bulgarian-Finnish intercultural research.

Fig. 2



This means that the Finnish silence and the Bulgarian talkativeness are both hetero- and auto-stereotypes. Of course, this is not the whole picture of the Finns’ and Bulgarians’ communication styles; rather, they propose a simplification, which to a certain extent even exaggerates some aspects of Bulgarian and Finnish social behaviour. At the same time, the answers prove that silence/ talk are important ingredients of the Finnish and Bulgarian cultural identities and national images. They are also specific characteristics of the North and South European cultural models that are closely connected to their geographical and natural features. Thus talkativeness/non-talkativeness or

silence/non-silence may be used as one of the indexes of cultural diversity, such as individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, etc.

One very interesting case in our Bulgarian-Finnish intercultural research, when using the index silence/talk was the German image. Many of the Finnish respondents (44) described the Germans as ‘cheerful’, ‘polite’, ‘sociable’ and ‘loud’. At the same time 69 Bulgarians stated that the Germans are ‘cold’ and ‘non-sociable’. For the ‘silent Finn’ the Germans offer an image of a loudly speaking, talkative and friendly nationality, while the talkative and socially oriented Bulgarian may perceive them as ‘cold’ and ‘non-sociable’. This example once again proves that a nation or a cultural group is always seen from the perspective of a particular cultural paradigm and that its image may shift according to the social context. In such a way cultural diversity can only be relatively measured by the perceptions of similarity and difference of a given group.

The examples above show that cultural diversity is often perceived also as a social-psychological distance. The latter is reflected both in the attitudes towards the ‘other’ and in the self-concept. Diversity and difference is always understood and labelled as such from the perspective of the individual or collective ‘self’. This is demonstrated by the so-called ‘projected auto-stereotypes’ in the Bulgarian-Finnish research. The Bulgarian and Finnish students were asked to list, by free association, what they believed people in certain countries think about them. Among these people were Germans, Bulgarians/Finns, Russians, Swedes (for the Finnish respondents)/ Turks (for the Bulgarian respondents). This question was not aimed at revealing what other nationalities really think about the Finns and Bulgarians but what in fact the Bulgarians and Finns think of themselves. ‘Projected stereotypes’ do not tell what the foreigner really thinks about us but they project our own fears about how we appear in the eyes of others. Projected stereotypes are thus an integral part of the collective perception of ‘self’.

The Bulgarian respondents listed 192 assumed Finnish characterizations of the Bulgarians of which most frequent were ‘unknown’ and ‘distant people’ (53); ‘sociable’ and ‘loud’ (29). The Finns listed 225 assumed Bulgarian characterizations of the Finns. Some of them supposed that the Bulgarians associate the Finns with the Nordic position (22), some others believed that they conceive the Finns as ‘silent’ or ‘quiet’ (22). Thus it seems that geographical distance predetermines the collective self-perception of the cultural groups. The more distant the group is, the vaguer its image becomes for the people appraising it. And second, the research proved that the index silence/non-silence may be applied both to the perceptions of the ‘others’ and to the self’ perceptions and self-esteem of the cultural groups, especially when the European North and South is compared.

### **Methodological challenges**

One of the most common methods in the research of cultural diversity is the empirical investigation. Many researchers use statistical data provided by different organizations or do their own research by means of questionnaires, as we did ours. However, there are some limitations of the questionnaire method and some sources of error must be kept in mind when the data is analyzed. These could be, for example, the error of commission, or the error of omission. The first is the risk that the questionnaire includes forced-choice questions the attributes of which are irrelevant to the topic, and the second points to the possibility that the questionnaire lacks some questions, which otherwise would be relevant and would provide some important information on the theme. However, it seems that the main limitation of this method is expressed in the fact that when referred to psychological attitudes and behaviour empirical investigation provides only partial information and cannot fully reveal the inner 'selves' of individuals. Human psyche can only be partially reflected by answering to closed and open questions in a questionnaire.

In addition a main shortcoming concerning the validity of the research, based on questionnaires, is the so-called 'social desirability bias': informants report on their self-attitudes, as well as on their attitudes towards the others, according to what they know is politically or socially correct but not according to their honest and free opinion. Some individuals may also want to underline their capacities and merits and try to hide some darker sides of their 'selves'. This also means that the questionnaire cannot always provide a full and even true picture of human personality.

When it comes to identity formation and human relationships, the observation and the psychological analysis based on it is still one of the most reliable methods. However, the main disadvantage of this method is that the observer may sometimes be trapped in the cultural attitudes of his/her own culture and actually reproduce stereotypical beliefs of one's own cultural paradigm. This is also why we chose to work by means of questionnaires, despite some of the obvious disadvantages of this method.

The questionnaire for the Bulgarian informants was in the Bulgarian language and the one presented to the Finnish students was in Finnish. The questionnaire was first produced in English, after which it was translated into Finnish and Bulgarian. In order to check that the translations were correct it was translated from Finnish and Bulgarian back into English. The first and the second English variants were compared and the questionnaire texts modified until the back-translation corresponded to the original. In this way the risk of incongruence between the Finnish and the Bulgarian texts was minimized. This process of double translation is time-consuming, but adds to the reliability of the interpretations.

The use of structured and unstructured questions has both advantages and disadvantages. Multiple-choice questions are easy to code and carry a lower risk

of misinterpretation of the answers by the analyst. On the other hand, the multiple-choice question anticipates the possible results by restricting the alternatives for those to whom the question is posed. Applied to questioning about cultural/ national attitudes this methodology produces a rather simplistic and sometimes distorted picture. When the informants are forced to choose between two or more given options, they do not have the possibility to express their attitude or opinion, if it differs from the options given by the researcher.

Open-ended questions provide the informants with the possibility to freely list their associations and opinions. On the other hand, they are more difficult to code and they also offer a greater risk of misinterpretation on the part of the researcher. When analyzing the data received from answers to open-ended questions, the researcher passes through the so called 'unriddling' phase (Alasuutari 1995:16). Unriddling means that on the basis of the clues produced and hints available, we give an interpretative explanation of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Accordingly, as in solving riddles, we should be able to come up with an answer that should not be in contradiction with any of the observations made.

Finding out people's attitudes, impressions, images, and emotions is challenging for many reasons. First, because people may not be aware of their unconscious attitudes; second, because they may not be willing to reveal their private, maybe repressed feelings and attitudes; and third, because they may not be able to verbalize and communicate them.

## **Conclusion**

Cultural diversity can only be examined in measuring the opposition 'self'-'other', where the comparison, affirmation and negation are important means of forging cultural identities. Perceptions of 'self' and 'other' are not permanent but can shift according to the cultural context.

Measuring people's attitudes and perceptions is a challenging task. Despite some shortcomings of the questionnaire method, the empirical research is one of the most reliable and objective methods of mapping cultural diversity.

In the Bulgarian-Finnish intercultural research both the Bulgarians and the Finns showed some prejudices to given cultural groups. Perceptions of 'difference' were based on dissimilarities between groups, predominantly ethnic, religious and racial. The research proved that cultural diversity is often translated in the respondents' minds into social-psychological distance from the cultural group-in-question. Also, the image of a given nation or cultural community is always built from the perspective of the informants' cultural model. Thus the image of one and the same nationality can prove to be diametrically opposed among the representatives of two nations. Hence, cultural diversity should be treated as a specific mental construction shifting in time in relation to the changes of the cultural context.

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