

Habilitation Thesis

Community Studies in the Perspective of Social Development

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I. ABSTRACT

The thesis comprises an overview of my main scientific and professional pursuits in the field of community sociology and community development sociology, along with the presentation of the plans for the development of my academic career. The description of the professional path will be closely related to the discussion of the main concepts, themes, approaches and theories that have guided, inspired and challenged me in research and teaching, especially during the last fourteen years.

The thesis reveals, first of all, my fascination for the study of communities, the starting point being a personal story anchored in the collective memory of a Romanian rural community marked by the intervention of the School of Sociology in Bucharest, in the interwar period.

Secondly, the thesis contains an exposition of the main types of community studies presented as research directions in the recent literature, but also of the way in which I managed to apply, throughout my career, these types of methodological intervention in the field research I conducted. The thesis focuses on several areas of interest, which alternate in my career and always fall within new settings, generated by the spectacular development of social sciences in recent decades, but also by the growing interest in interdisciplinary studies. These are social areas that are associated with current and relevant phenomena to the dynamics of contemporary community life and that are truly challenging for analysts and designers of social development policies and programmes: the challenges of migration and ethnicity, the challenges of sustainability and development of social services, as well as the challenges related to the postmodern world of digitization, the need for branding and the use of local resources as a basis for the sustainable development of communities.

I will go into all these topics in the chapters that make up the central structure of the thesis, providing, for each one, arguments on the motivation of their choice as areas of interest, the objectives set for documentation or field research, methods and techniques used, as well as results, along with, of course, the indication of publications and participation in research projects and conferences, where these concerns were materialized.

Having as a theoretical framework the concepts and methodological directions specific to the sociological approach of community studies, I will first discuss my scientific pursuits and achievements on the general topic of social change and community development. The central concept will be that of *community development*, which will be anchored in the broader notion of *social change* and in the paradigm of social development, being then projected towards what is today a desideratum of social change: *sustainable development* of human communities.

The thesis then includes the presentation of the various perspectives and areas of community life that I have been interested in over the last decade and a half, and that I have addressed either individually or in small teams or institutionally, by participating in research projects. These particular areas of community studies refer to: a) ethnicity - with a focus on the ethnic economy and on some specific issues in communities with a significant number of Roma, especially education and social issues; b) migration - from the perspective of the impact of different forms of migration on social change; c) socio-medical services - highlighting research that has identified problems and solutions in different sectors of the medical system or in the area of social assistance and d) use of cultural heritage resources for the sustainable development of local communities.

For each of these segments on which my career has developed I will refer to the most important publications, either in the form of books or book chapters, or in the form of scientific articles published in journals, two of which have recently appeared in indexed journals. Science (Clarivate Analytics): a) in the journal *Visual Communication*, where I published an article on documenting social change in a rural community through the visual technique of re-photography and b) in the journal *Sustainability*, where we proposed a reinterpretation, from the perspective of sustainable development, of an intangible cultural heritage resource specific to the rural communities in Făgăraș Region.

Throughout this presentation I will permanently refer to the methodologies used. On the one hand, I will show that my interest is directed towards qualitative and visual techniques,

which I consider suitable for exploratory studies and which aim at documenting community dynamics. On the other hand, I will also show my own methodological contributions that I have made in the form of scientific articles that clarify aspects of methodology or in the form of applications of different techniques for collecting and processing textual or visual data, in the framework of field research projects. They fall within what recent literature calls *community-based qualitative research (CBQR)* (Johnson, 2019). I will refer in particular to: the semi-structured interview, the narrative interview, the focus group, the participatory needs assessment, storytelling, the re-photography and photovoice technique, as well as the mixed methodology of social network analysis.

During the presentation of these scientific contributions and methodological applications, I will reveal the added value on the line of internationalization that I have brought professionally, since 2006, to the development of the academic network of scientific and didactic cooperation, through the Erasmus program or by participating in scientific events.

Starting from the distinction between *story* and *narrative* which I discuss in the most recent book published as a first author (Csesznek, Coman, 2020) I will show that if at the base of my career as a sociologist there is a story (*story*) with a strong motivational and inspiring role, the strategic line that will guide my career for the next years will be summarized in a *narrative*. Thus, in the final part of the thesis I will present this *narrative* built on the scientific and professional dimensions, themed on the directions of research and teaching activity which I want to develop my career on, in the coming years.