VOLUNTEERING AS AN INFORMAL STRATEGY TO BUILD INTERCULTURAL VALUES

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Abstract: A questionable argument underlies the education public policies geared to fostering intercultural values: a strong sense of self-identity is a problem itself in multicultural societies, and compulsory education is the main strategy to teach how to get and to deal with hybrid identities. However, empirical evidence indicates that the volunteers for the practice of Catalan language have an intercultural behavior, just driven by a strong regional identity and without having had any compulsory education on that regard. Motivations and outcomes of this intercultual actions are explained through the conceptual category named "Responsible trust", designed following the Grounded Theory methodology.

Keywords: Interculturality, informal education, volunteering.

1.Introduction

The post-industrial capitalism has generated vigorous migratory flows and shaped multicultural societies in which people with different identities come into contact. Thus, the democratic institutions in cities that receive migratory flows face the challenge of promoting *Active Citizenship* between people who do not enjoy the same status of full citizenship, that is, between the indigenous and immigrant populations.

Three arguments underlie the majority of the studies and the public policies oriented towards social cohesion. First, that identity of an individual can be identified easily from visible features as color of their skin, the language they speak, or their gender, and with more difficulties from less evident characteristics, such as their sexual preference, their political orientation or their religious belief. People who live in multicultural societies that conceive the immigration as an economic and social problem *per se*, frequently avoid contact with immigrants to reduce the sensations of dread, distrust and ill-will (Delgado, 2009).

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The second argument develops the idea that *modern citizenship*, constructed in the relationship Subject-State-nation, still is the main juridical tool to take part legally in the public space and to enjoy social benefits, but it impedes the conviviality among different identities because of its historical links to *national culture* reproduces the tensions that it should solve for social cohesion (Barber, 2003; Koopmans, 2005). The European Union has declared that seemingly another citizenship is being formulated among people willing to coexist with people with multiple, hybrid, fluid, postnational identities. These citizenships are being enriched with the conviviality in diverse situations and in local, regional, national and international contexts (ALBOAN & Universidad de Deusto, 2009).

The third argument supposes that it is possible to train people with the necessary competencies to coexist in multicultural societies (Banks, 1997, 2004; Wolf & Macedo, 2004). The European Union has unfolded a wide range of initiatives for the training of the *European Identity* and the *Active Citizenship*, and several public institutions, universities, non-governmental organizations, educative centers, mass media and experts in the topic have reacted to the challenge of developing formal and non-formal programs to reach this aim (Bolivar, 2007; European Commission, 2007; García, 2007; Mascherini & Hoskins, 2008).

The three previous arguments justify the idea that the receiving societies of the migratory flows behave with hostility to different identities, and that the main way of training the new citizens should be with a formal or non-formal education, where the learning process of the competencies that facilitate the social cohesion are planned and controlled. However, empirical evidence proves that in Catalonia, Spain, there are indigenous people willing to meet voluntarily with people from different cultural background, dealing seemingly well with the proximity, and without the intermediation of a formal education process: the volunteers for the practice of the Catalan language. The main characteristics of this group of people are: 1) they have never received any formal education on issues of interculturality, 2) they have a strong sense of Catalan identity, 3) they have difficulties to identify where and how they obtained the willingness to meet up with people from different cultural background, and 4) they admit that intercultural values may be learned, but cannot be taught.

2. Aims of the research and methodology

The aims of this research were as follows:

•	To identify the reasons that lead the volunteers of the volunteer programme for the practice of Catalan language to meet people from different cultural identities.

•   To describe, through a constructed theoretical category, the role of the values to strengthen *Active Citizenship* in a volunteer programme for the practice of Catalan language.

This research has been undertaken with the Grounded Theory methodology, that is an inductive and full research method that tries to understand the action in a substantive area from the point of view of the people involved. This understanding revolves around the main concern of the participants whose behavior continually resolves their main concern (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010; Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

Grounded Theory methodology consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative or quantitative data to construct theories "grounded" in the data itself. This process is in direct contrast to common logico-deductive methods mainly in three aspects: an inductive process, a constant comparative method and a theoretical sampling.

1. Inductive process: Grounded Theory is not based on the confirmation of hypothesis, for testing or refuting pre-designed theories by pre-designed analytical categories (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Grounded Theory tries to build theoretical categories grounded in data in order to explain the main concern of a specific group of people.

2. Constant comparative method: As soon as the theoretical categories emerged throughout the in-depth interviews process, a unit of analysis and some comparison groups had to be defined. The aim is to constantly compare the properties and dimensions of the data in both the unit of analysis and the comparison groups. This strategy fosters the construction of the main theoretical category.

3. Theoretical sampling: Data collection is made through an inductive process and the theoretical categories are built through theoretical sampling. This means that, in order to gain a deeper understanding of analysed cases and facilitate the development of analytic concepts, new cases are chosen to compare with ones that have already been studied. The goal of theoretical sampling is to build a theoretical category, no matter how many cases are needed, rather than prove the probabilistic sampling of the cases.

This research was conducted with inductive logic to build an analytical category in order to explain the motivations and outcomes of a group of people that voluntarily engage in face-to-face meetings to practise the Catalan language with people from different cultural backgrounds.

2.1 Participants

Although there are a number of governmental and civic volunteer programmes to foster the use of the Catalan language among Catalan people and new speakers, the *Voluntariat per la llengua* has a unique characteristic: this programme consists of putting someone who habitually speaks Catalan in contact with another person who does not speak it fluently in order for them to meet up and talk wherever, whenever and about whatever they like, for a minimum of 10 hours.

The *Voluntariat per la llengua* is not a teaching programme, nor a substitute for Catalan classes. It is a regular activity to foster confidence for the new speaker of Catalan in a very informal environment.

In this study 57 people were involved: 30 of them were volunteers for the practice of Catalan language, 12 were new speakers of the Catalan language, and 15 belonged to the comparison groups, according to the unit of analysis, as follows. The variance in the numbers of interviews conducted across groups was defined by the argument mentioned above: the number of people involved in the research it is not a probabilistic sampling of the cases, but the proper number of cases that helped to built a theoretical category.

2.2 Unit of analysis

As has been stated, this research is interested in finding out the motivation some people have to meet foreign people. Thus, the unit of analysis has been defined as follows: the Catalan people who take part in the *Voluntariat per la llengua*programme in the city of Barcelona. In order to carry out the general method of comparative analysis (Glaser, 1998) people outside of the unit of analysis have been interviewed in-depth as well. Figure 1ilustrates the Unit of analysis and the comparison groups.

Figure 1. Unit of analysis and comparison groups.
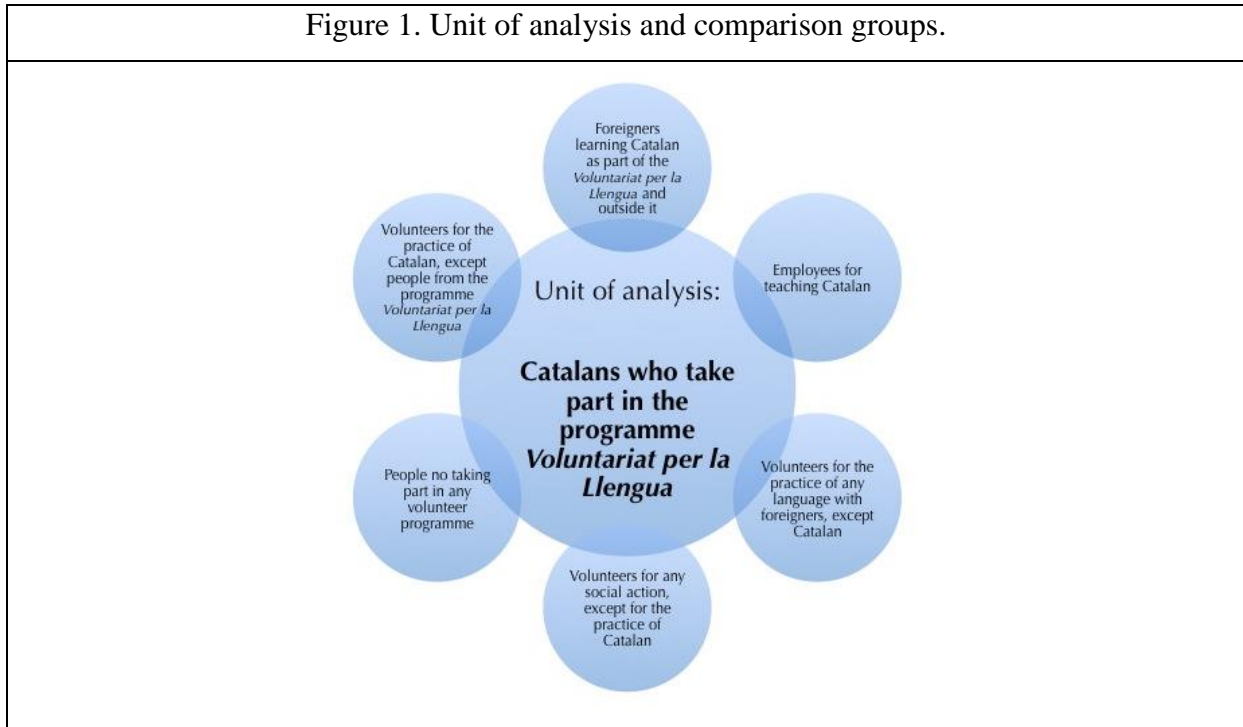
2.3 Data collection, interview guideline and Open Coding

In-depth, open-ended interviews were done to collect the data. These interviews were not part of the programme Voluntariar per la Llengua. The purpose of these interviews was to engage in dialogue with participants about their volunteer activities and specifically in the *Voluntariat per la llengua*. 30 interviews were conducted with volunteers, more than 12 interviews with new speakers, and more than 15 interviews with people from the comparison groups. The Open Coding was carried out according to the Grounded Theory codification process (Glaser, 1978).

## 3. Outcomes of data analysis through the axial coding

Some findings indicate that the supposed conflict between immigrants and Catalan people, and the formal and non-formal education as the only way to get the values and competencies for the *Active Citizenship* might be reviewed. Since the traditional pedagogy believed that important learning only could happen in a formal education process, the initiatives for training on *Active Citizenship* have mainly taken place in the educational system. However, according to the experiences of the volunteers, informal learning might generate significant competencies on *Active Citizenship* as well. Apparently these competencies went unnoticed for a long time by both, institutions and people. The volunteers were forced by the in-depth interviews to identify the places, and the moments where they

learnt specific knowledge, a particular skill, or something of intercultural value. When those responses were contrasted with the responses of the comparisons groups, some ideas emerged:

•   Volunteers for the practice of Catalan language in the Voluntariat per la llengua programme accept that they are willing to do things to collaborate in the persons' well-being of different identity, but at the same time, some of them admitted that at some time they have had racist and xenophobic feelings towards some cultural groups, that can be overcome with rational and complex thought. They perceive the voluntary work for the practice of the Catalan language as an exchange of intercultural experiences, more than an attempt to help immigrant people, and it also has, to some extent, a selfish aim because it satisfies their feeling of being useful, loved, and it also strengthen their Catalan identity. They describe themselves as active people looking for easy, fun and convenient, non-charitable volunteering programmes. They usually find that once they meet and become friends with people from a different cultural background, many common things appear, regardless of national or cultural identity, for instance, emotions and feelings.

•   Some of them find a weak relationship between their family values and their willingness to participate in the practice of Catalan language in the Voluntariat per la llenguaprogramme; most of them find it difficult to identify the influence of a friend in developing this volunteer collaboration. They say that there is not a direct relationship between the formal or non-formal education that they have received, and their disposition to coexist with different identities, and they also declared that this disposition is something "natural" that cannot be taught, but can be learned.

•   They say that their voluntary participation in the practice of the Catalan language is not a political action, even though they know that this issue is a very important politically. According to them, the political dimension of the Catalan language never comes up in the practice of Catalan sessions (that was confirmed in the inmersion process of the researcher). Their participation in the volunteer programme is due to a strong sense of identity, and due to the feeling that Catalan language and Catalan culture are under threat. They feel Catalan, but they find it difficult to feel Spanish; however, they can also easily feel European.

•   They understand (and the new speakers confirmed this idea) that foreign learners of Catalan have a practical interest in this language: to have more possibilities to get a job, to understand their children's homework, for instance. This very pragmatic interest in the Catalan language by new speakers does not seem to be uncomfortable to Catalan people. On the contrary, they declared that this fact could be a good starting point in order to make the Catalan language necessary in the labor market and in the world of educational in the future.

4. Axial coding

After having showed briefly the main descriptive categories, the inductive process lead to sort all categories around one axial concept. By doing so, it will be possible to build a graphic representation in order to identify the core conceptual category: the Responsible trust (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Core conceptual category.
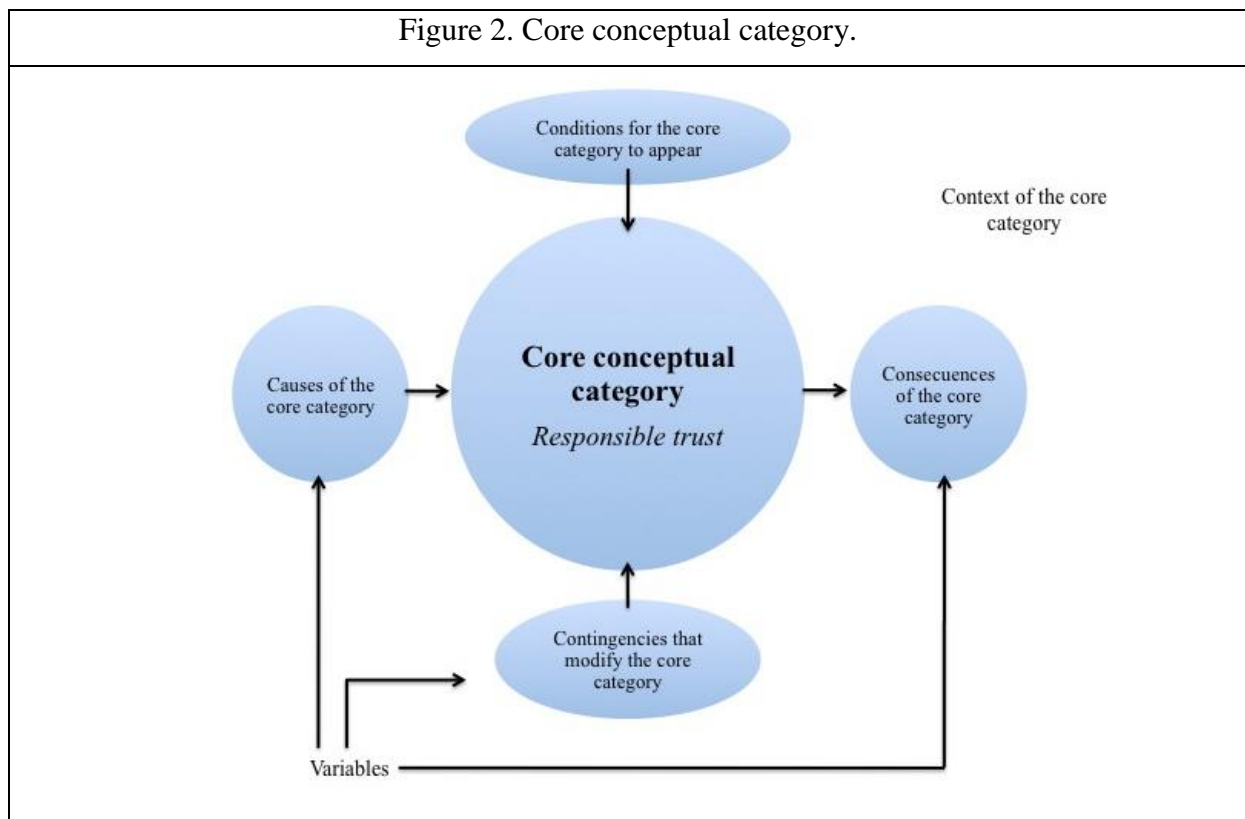
It will be also possible to relate its peripheral categories (causes, variables, context, conditions, contingencies, and consequences).

A)   Some **causes** of responsible trust:

Living in an inclusive family during childhood.

Seeing good moral behaviour in a member of the family.

Thinking that the indigenous population has been gentile throughout the history with newcomers.

A strong sense of identity.

B)   Some **conditions** that help responsible trust to appear:

Getting information during childhood about different cultures.

Traveling or consuming travel related products, such as TV programmes or journals.

Coexisting within multicultural informal environments.

Having parents or family from different cultural backgrounds.

Having a sentimental relationship with somebody from a different cultural background.

Existence of easy, funny and convenient intercultural volunteering programmes in the society.

C) Some **contingencies** that hamper the appearance of responsible trust:

Not having multicultural environments during childhood.

Not having a strong sense of identity.

Not having time to colaborate in an intercultural volunteer programme.

Not having skills for doing a specific task related to regional identity, such as practising a local language.

Not feeling free and spontaneous within the intercultural volunteer programme.

D) Some **variables** of responsible trust:

Folklorisation of cultures: remarking the difference in the cultural background.

Assimilation of cultures: obligating the immigrants to incorporate the society values of the host nation.

E) Some **context** items that could shape responsible trust:

Political context: feeling that the national identity threatens the regional one.

Sociological context: a strong regional identity sense.

Institutional context: a strong public policy on regional identity and local language.

Historic context: a narrative on rejection and contempt towards the regional identity.

Symbolic context: a collective wish to achieve autonomy and freedom.

F) Some desired **outcomes** of the responsible trust:

Opportunities to meet up with people from different cultural background.

Sharing ideas and finding out about different lifestyles.

Finding the same emotions and feelings among people, regardless of the cultural background.

Finding that people have similar concerns, regardless the cultural background they come from.

Getting and giving emotional rewards and gratitude.

5. Conclusion

Evidence found in this research suggests that in the region of Catalonia, Spain, there might exists a group of persons ready for meeting voluntarily with people from different

cultural background, dealing seemingly well with the proximity, and without the intermediation of a formal education or a non-formal education process: the volunteers for the practice of the Catalan language.

This finding suggests that there may be alternative ways to formal education to strengthen the values of *Active Citizenship*.

Responsible trust is the conceptual category that has been built in this research in order to explain the motivations and outcomes of a group of people that voluntarily engage in a number of face-to-face meetings to practise the Catalan language with people from a different cultural background. The main characteristics of this group of people are: 1) they have never received any formal or non-formal education on issues of *Active Citizenship*, 2) they have a strong sense of Catalan identity, and 3) they have difficulties to identify where and how they obtained the willingness to meet up with people from different cultural background. From a conceptual point of view, four dimensions of the Responsible trust could be named: Inception, Insight, *Learning process*, and *Performance*. Each one of these properties have several dimensions (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. Responsible trust: properties and dimensions.
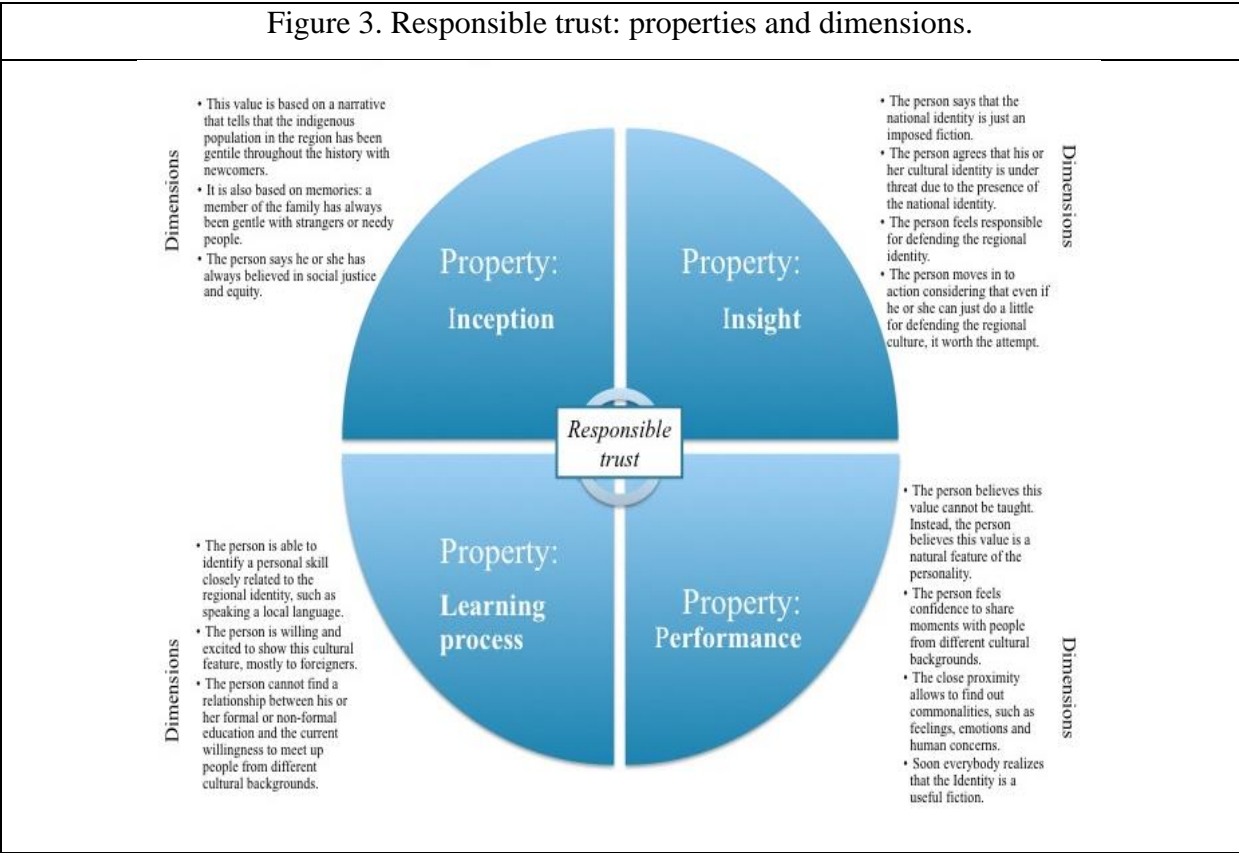
These kinds of voluntary civic activities, based on a *Responsible trust*, could be relevant to democratic institutions dedicated to promoting social cohesion because they show that, in addition to compulsory education and the non-formal education programmes, there could be another way to build and strengthen *Active Citizenship*.

As shown in the Inception property, one way to strengthen *Active Citizenship* among the adult population, that is, not of compulsory schooling age, could be to strengthen regional identity. That is, strengthen the local language and the narratives on regional autonomy and freedom.

Regional identity could be a driving force to encourage people from different cultural backgrounds to meet. Although these face-to-face meetings have practical purposes (proselytising identity, for the volunteers of the language; learning a language, for new speakers), unexpectedly important things happen: people can recognise that emotions, feelings and human concerns are very similar, regardless of cultural background.

The property *Insight* demonstrates that having a strong sense of local identity is not enough to make someone willing to meet people from different cultural background. A sense of threat to local identity is also necessary. This condition (the threat) leads indigenous people to share regional cultural features gently, and to search for symbolic alliances with the foreign population. Indigenous people feel responsible for defending their regional identity, and because of this are willing to meet up and share ideas with people from different cultural backgrounds. Thus, the possibility to meet and trust a perfect stranger appears. Eventually, friendship occurs.

The *Learning process* property reveals the fact that the volunteers for the practice of the Catalan language (and also the volunteers from the comparison groups, that is, volunteers on other volunteer programmes that do not involve the practice of the Catalan language) hardly remember where and how they obtained the willingness to meet people from different cultural background suggests that the influence of formal education and the non-formal education in this matter is quite weak. It is interesting that most of these people stated that meeting strangers, helping unknown people, and feeling some kind of responsibility for the well-being of others, have always been a "natural" and fundamental part of his or her character or, at least, a tradition within the family. In short: *Responsible trust* could not be taught, but it could be learned through a informal learning processes. This is particularly important because it seems that the *Responsible trust* is a value that cannot be developed in deeply planned educational environments. Actually, it is based on sharing unexpected topics and moments, and enjoying them together, without any order from any authority.

The *Performance* property shows that once the volunteers and the new speakers decide to meet and share differences, a curious phenomenon happens. Paradoxically, the more differences they look for, the more common ground they find. Then, it is crystal clear: identity should not be a morally relevant issue to coexist peacefully. On the contrary: it should be an opportunity to feel *Responsible trust*.

The evidence found in this research demonstrates that building flexible, hybrid or multiple identities is not the only way to promote contact between people from different cultural backgrounds, as is commonly said in the European social discourse. It is also possible to promote contact between people of different identities if the local identity is reinforced. This form of social cohesion has not been sufficiently studied in multicultural societies, but could offer creative solutions and new values to strengthen *Active Citizenship*.

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