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Food connecting people

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According to Eurostat¹, in 2017, people living in the EU but born in a non-EU country had a 38.3 % at-risk-of-poverty-or-social-exclusion rate, which was twice higher compared with native residents (20,7 % of them were at risk of poverty or social exclusion). This indicator has increased by 1,2 percentage point since 2010².

What can be done to help these people integrate into society and help them find their own place, feel welcome in a new country so that they can feel like at home, without fear of being excluded, among kind, open-minded and tolerant people? It has become increasingly clear that social integration does not mean forced assimilation, i.e. expecting people to give up their language and culture in order to fit into a new community. Integration is about creating spaces of encounter, spaces which are open and non-threatening, that promote knowledge, that allow one to get to know the "other" and their humanity, that help create ties and construct a different image than the stereotypical one.

Some people are curious about new culture but a lot of people are afraid of alterity/ otherness, in line with the common "fear of the unknown". According to R. N. Carlton "fear of the unknown may be a, or possibly the, fundamental fear"³. People still experience constant anxiety about dangers that can strike without warning. Unfortunately many people perceive an "unknown" culture as a danger foreigners bring with them, which leads to reluctance to live in a multicultural society. Mixophobia, is what Z. Bauman called "a highly predictable and widespread reaction to the mind-boggling, spine-chilling and nerve-breaking variety of human types and lifestyles that rub shoulders in the streets of contemporary cities"⁴.

How to change people's attitudes towards unknown culture? The answer is simple. Get to know them, the culture they are afraid of, show them that there is no such a big difference between us, and if there is, is nothing wrong about it, because we are all equal. Remind them what H. Jackson Brown Jr. wrote "remember that everyone you meet is afraid of something, loves something and has lost something". How to do this? This answer is not that easy. This is where the plot thickens. There are a lot of social campaigns which make sense, of course, but the "refugees/migrants are cool" campaign doesn't reach the people. We don't need just a concept of multiculturalism or integration, but effective practices of incorporating these concepts into our daily lives.



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Food and cooking. You might be surprised. Food is not only an essential element of our life and health which meets our physiological needs. The social context of food is becoming increasingly acknowledged. Food is used to build individual and group identity, it is an essential element of cultural identification. Cooking is a complex set of activities, which is a part of culture. By exploring what, where, how, and why others' food choices and eating habits take a specific form, we develop a better understanding of ourselves and others. Food choices made by social groups can provide knowledge about their culture, set of beliefs, susceptibility to change and assimilation⁵. From theory to practice: let's move on to examples of social integration projects through food.

Musa Dağdeviren, called a “culinary anthropologist”, owner of three restaurants in Istanbul, gave an example how food can unify people from different backgrounds. In the 90s there were a lot of political problems in Turkey, and consequently Istanbul became polarized. A “you-versus-me fight” atmosphere was reflected in every aspect of life, including food service. People would come to restaurants saying: “I don't eat at a Sunni's/ Armenian's/Turk's restaurant”. And they would leave. That was something Musa couldn't understand.

He decided to travel all over Turkey, he visited many villages, learning from an elderly how to cook traditional Turkish food, keeping many regional dishes from being forgotten. He wanted to publish a cookbook, but he changed his mind and implemented the idea of familiarizing his countrymen to the regional dishes - regional dishes of their “enemies” as his customers would say at the time, in the “Çiya” restaurant.

It was a great success. People gathered and their purpose wasn't just to eat, but to feel the acceptance of their culture's existence. Musa's dream materialized; his customers' diversity was the manifestation of the food served in his restaurant. As Musa said: “They are all different and they share their differences at one table”. One of the Turkish chefs, Mehmet Gürs, described the essence of Musa's restaurant: “Going to Çiya you get rid of your mental ethnic borders, the religious borders, the national borders. We don't have to be enemies”.

The above sentence may fit to any place because food plays an important role no matter where we are. Prejudice against people from another country can be overcome by getting to know them and their culture because “being empathetic is seeing the world through the eyes of the other, not



seeing your world reflected in their eyes¹". One way to achieve this may be through food. The dinner table is a place that unites people, breaks down barriers, and connects souls. The food is carrier of our culture, so let's exchange it! Ask someone from another country in a restaurant if you can join him, get to know him, ask the waiter/ cook in a bar/restaurant with a foreign cuisine for the recipe, ask where the dish comes from and what is the story behind it. Start the conversation. Be curious, do not be indifferent.

And do not forget C. Chavez words: "if you really want to make a friend, go to someone's house and eat with him... the people who give you their food, give you their heart".

What else can we do? Next step in making society tolerant and open to all cultures is educating children because they are our future and they have possibility to repair everything what we have not been able to do so far.

Kids are generally innocent of stereotypes held by adults. They are naturally curious about the world and people around them. Children desire to define themselves as individuals, what might be the root of their questions about skin, habits, outfit, way of living, religion and other differences. What we can do is show them all of these differences and teach them it is a part of the world we live in. Diversity is an essential component of life. The lessons we need to give children should always end with the idea: "not better, not worse, just different". One of the options to teach children tolerance in natural way (through non formal education) through cooking workshops in a multicultural context, bringing together children with different nationality and background. Exploring the world of cultural diversity through new flavors and stories hiding behind them it is something what kids will not forget. It would be a precious practical lesson of social integration. The message will be: we are different, but we can sit at the same dinner table, be curious about our otherness and respect it in natural way.

These "multicultural cooking workshops" could be organized in a school, as a part of a classes or as a series of extracurricular activities. The presence of the parents on it would be desirable because the truth is that children imitate them, observe their demeanour and then incorporate it in their own behavioral repertoires. As James Baldwin said "Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them." Hence, what we need to do as caretakers of

¹ Carl Rogers



the next generation is give children something great to imitate.

You can present an idea of multicultural cooking workshops to the school authorities in your city! Convince them how big an impact it can have on their pupils' way of thinking, their social life, world they are going to live in! A world we all want for our children, our brothers and sisters – a world without judgment and prejudice, full of tolerance, kindness, curiosity, where everyone has their own place. A world with different colors, flavors and fragrances.

References:

¹ https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=ilc_peps06&lang=en

² https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Europe_2020_indicators_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion#General_overview

³ R.N. Carleton, *Into the Unknown: a review and synthesis of contemporary models involving uncertainty*, Journal of Anxiety Disorders, 39 (2016).

⁴ Bauman, Z., *Liquid love: On the frailty of human bonds*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.

⁵ Mennell S., Murcott A., van Otterloo A.H., *The Sociology of Food: Eating, Diet and Culture*, Sage, London, 1992.



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