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“Among people”

Westernization as prestige in a Roma community in Northern Romania

The academic work done among Gypsy/Roma in Europe in the past decades has increased dramatically, especially after the collapse of Communism in the Eastern Bloc and the adherence of Eastern European countries in the European Union, which allowed Roma to travel more easily in Western Europe. A primary argument in Romani studies is that the value system of the Roma is based on unique cultural phenomena and that Roma society must therefore be understood from their own cultural perspective (Stewart, 1997). Because of some Roma cultural traits, many non-Roma believe the group cannot be integrated into modern European society and Roma are therefore frequently despised by members of the dominant majority. I collected data in the summer of 2013 in a village in northern Romania where I conducted interviews with Roma students, Roma parents, and non-Roman teachers. I also engaged in participant-observation in the classroom, after school hours, and in the Roma/non-Roma community. My informants are not culturally conservative, Romani-speaking Roma, but they are nonetheless seen in their community and country as “pure Roma” (Acton, 1974). The results of my research clearly indicate that the Roma students I interviewed want to live, as they frequently told me, “among people,” and that they, too, want the western life that Romania has adopted. Like their non Roma peers at school; they say they “want in” (Gmelch, 1985).

Roma, also known as Gypsies, are the largest minority in Europe. Roma are an ethnic group who have their origins in South Asia, and are believed to have migrated into Europe in the eleventh century. Many Roma speak a distinct language, Romani, and most also speak the national language of the country they inhabit. Historically Roma were identified as a homogenous linguistic and cultural group. However, my research from one Roma community in Romania shows that their traditions diverge very little from those of non-Roma. In addition, these Roma are the same in their neighborhood and families as any non-Roma. The perceptions that non-Roma have towards Roma, also influence the role Roma play in the dominated society. Roma work as day laborers for non-Roma, usually farming land; they also beg in the village, an activity that serves as a significant source of subsistence. Roma see themselves as “gunoi”,¹ or “trash” of society, as one Roma woman told me; “a Gypsy is good just for work, then nobody cares about us.” Roma live under the constant fear that if they do not act properly, non-Roma will not hire them as laborers or give them money or goods when they are begging. If Roma steal or lie, non-Roma will ban them and not allow them to come into their yards. This banning is usually temporary, as non-Roma depends on Roma labor.

Contemporary anthropologists, like Michael Stewart, whose focus is on Roma studies, argue that Roma values are *Sui generis*², without “shared religion, without any form of ritual or political leadership” (Stewart, 2013). Patrick Williams partially contradicts this argument, by

¹ Meaning trash in Romanian language.

² An example will be the child marriage and Stewart opens one of his articles “Roma and Gypsy “Ethnicity” as a subject of anthropological inquiry” with a powerful anecdote about it (a 20-year-old Roma charged with rape of his wife 11).

stating that “it is absolutely true, that the Manus³ live in the world of the Gadzos⁴, but not in the same world as the Gadzos”. A similar approach is John Ogbu’s, “acting-white”⁵ argument, in which he attempts to understand the academic failure of African-American students in the US.

I left US, ready to confront an inflexible and closed Roma community. What I found in a northern Romanian village was the opposite of what I expected. None of the theories from my literature review were applicable to my Roma host-community. The stereotypes and common views of Roma/Gypsies depict them singing, dancing, palm reading and wearing colorful clothes. The goal of this project was to glean the values and attitudes of Roma parents and non-Roma teachers regarding childhood education, in order to demonstrate that differences in expectations and practices of child socialization between parents and teachers contribute to the failure of Roma children in achieving the same level of academic success as their non-Roma counterparts. My research questions were “Do Roma want to be integrated?” “*Can* Roma be integrated?”, “Where do Roma see themselves in their society?” and “Why are Roma students, abandoning school or not completing their education?”

³ Manus- Roma in the Romani language

⁴ Gazdos – non-Roma in the Romani language

⁵ Through this approach Ogbu argues that African American students failed in school because they are afraid of betraying their culture and identity by acting white. Ogbu was trying to figure out why certain minorities did worse than other minorities – e.g. African Americans did worse than Africans. The conclusion was that African Americans and Native Americans were constantly faced with making choices to express their loyalties and affiliations where migrant groups (Africans, Asians etc.) had other less contradictory options for integrating disparate components of their identity. It’s a controversial theory, of course, with some people arguing that Ogbu gave insufficient attention to structural inequalities.

For fieldwork I spent seven weeks in the village. I conducted 31 interviews that included Roma students, Roma parents and non-Roma teachers; I also engaged in participant-observation inside the classroom, after school hours, and in the Roma/non-Roma community. The Roma community was segregated at the outskirts of the village, just outside the village marker limits and the people call this neighborhood *La Tigani*.⁶ In order to understand the segregation I also had to spend time in the village with the non-Roma.

Class	No. Students	Romanian Students	Roma-Romanian students	Roma-Romanian informants	Simultaneous	If simultaneous, with which class?
0	4	2	2	2	Yes	I
I	14	6	7	1	Yes	0
II	10	6	3	1	Yes	IV
III	16	6	9	3	No	
IV	9	4	5	1	Yes	II
V	16	14	2	0	No	
VI	8	6	2	0	Yes	VIII
VII	7	5	2	2	No	
VIII	12	11	1	1	Yes	VI

Table1. Enrollments rates for each class based on ethnicity in Vulturii' school.

The Roma students, during interviews and even participant observation, consistently used the phrase “among people”, as they showed me around their neighborhood, pointing out the state of ruin of their homes, compared to the village homes where non-Roma lived. Even in school, the Roma students are always segregated, their place being in the back of the class, while non-

⁶ In Romanian meaning "at the gypsies".

Roma have access to the first row. The psychological impact of this on Roma students is significant; for example while I was in the school; a 7 years old Roma girl, Amalia⁷, was moved to the first row, next to a non-Roma classmate. My presence and the interview questions⁸ to the teacher promoted that. Amalia felt that she was gaining prestige, not just among her non-Roma classmates but also in relation to her siblings and Roma neighbors. Amalia spoked highly that day in front of her siblings, neighbors and I about her new spot in the class. Based on the interviews administrated to Roma students and non-Roma teachers, I categorized reasons for why Roma students stay in the back of the class. Bellow it's the table showing the results.

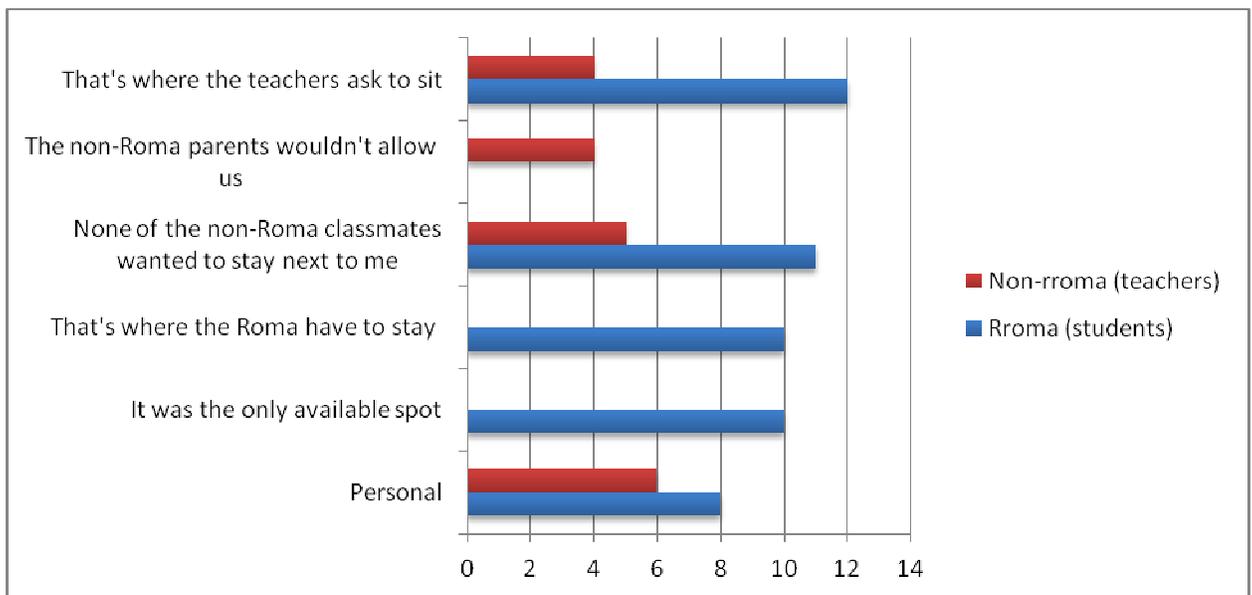


Table 2. Reasons for the segregation of Roma students in classrooms

Another example of Roma segregation and low status is illustrated by a conversation with older Roma students (14-16yrs old), who told me that they would like to get married to a non-Roma because this would offer them access to a house in a village (among people), having a

⁷ All the names of people, locations and region in this paper are pseudonyms in order to protect my informants and the community

⁸ Example of interview questions "Why are Roma students sitting in the back?" "Did you ever had Roma students sitting in the first row / next to a non-Roma student?"

garden and their own land to farm. There are no official barriers to property ownership regarding Roma in Romania. The reason for Roma living at the outskirts of the community is the social inequalities. I do want to emphasize that the non-Roma inherit from the older generations what is believed to be “proper for a Roma”, the non-Roma act accordingly to the norms of their society.

The community, especially the school, wants to help them but they have limited resources, information and training to do so.

Some Roma parents want their children to go to school, because they see how hard it is for them not to know how to read and write. They feel their lack of literacy has severely impeded their understanding of their rights and of Romanian law, generally. There were also parents who, even though they think education is important, believe that they, themselves, can live without it, especially since they never attended school. Parents who have been encourage by teachers' statements that their children are smart and capable, are also considering letting their children go to high school. The Roma students want to have everything their non-Roma peers have, such as computers, brand-name clothes, cell phones, and opportunities for travel. The older students understand the importance of further education, but it is hard to see it as an option in their future because of their Socio Economical Status. The Roma students are more tolerated by their non-Roma classmates, compared with the past generations, because of the non-Roma exposure to Western media and their teachers now having further training⁹, based on European Union standards. I would thus argue the benefits of Westernization¹⁰ in opening access to tolerance for

⁹ The teachers are required to attend two classes per year, to improve their teaching- classes based such as: working with Roma students, child psychology classes etc.

¹⁰ “Westernization is here defined as a macro level by the development of a cash economy, secularized government, formal education system, and urban residential units.”(Levy 1966; Spindler 1984)

and even appreciation of the values and traditions of a wide range of cultural systems, an approach that is fostered by the best aspects of the contemporary West.

Clearly, anti-Roma discrimination still exists. A great part of this discrimination today may be said to be the result of the misunderstanding and lack of communication between the two ethnicities. The non-Roma expects too much of Roma- that they should act and get jobs as any non-Roma would, yet they continue to treat Roma as beggars and inferiors. The moment non-Roma treat Roma as equals will produce a significant difference, and Roma parents' attitudes towards education will change. My informants are not culturally conservative, Romani-speaking Roma, but they are nonetheless seen in their community and country as "pure Roma" (Acton, 1974). The results of my research clearly indicate that the Roma students I interviewed want to live, as they frequently told me, "among people," and that they, too, want the western life that Romania has adopted. Like their non Roma peers at school; they say they "want in" (Gmelch, 1985).

In conclusion, based on my research and small sample¹¹ I would argue that the Roma want to be integrated, as all the parents explained during the interviews: "who wouldn't want a bright future for their children; everybody wants the best for their offspring." I argue for integration and not assimilation, because there is nothing to be assimilated by this Roma community, their lifestyle is no different from the dominant society.

¹¹ This type of Roma community is not unique in Romania. At least in this region, most of the villages have at their periphery, a Roma community. So even it seems a small sample, my sample is equivalent to many communities.

Then why are the Roma not integrated? Primarily because the change in attitudes towards Roma minority is happening to a much slower rate in order to make up for hundreds of years of oppression and discrimination. The non-Roma host-community still sees the Roma minority as dangerous, unworthy and untrusted. In order to explain my argument I will illustrate some of the examples. Bill Gates sponsored the computer lab in the village school. During computer lab, I notice that the Roma students were not allowed to touch the computers just to watch wherever the instructor was teaching, while the non-Roma students had access work in them. I asked the coordinator teacher about the restriction that Roma have in the computer lab and her answer was "They do not know how to work them, they will break them, so we don't allow them (the Roma) to touch them. The lab it's a good of the school, if they break the computers how is that fare to the non-Roma students." Non-Roma students are allowed to work in computers because the majority (if not all) have computers home and they know how computers function. To the only Roma girl, from this community Dana, who attended high-school in the city this had a major impact. In her first interaction with her high school classmates and teacher they could not believe that Dana did not even knew how to open a PC. Another example, outside of school, is when I went to the store¹² in the village for groceries. While I was sitting in line, two Roma young ladies were ordering what they needed. The cashier was just passing angry the produces requested by the two Roma, at the end they asked for a bottle of vodka and the cashier start yelling at them "Ce dracu mai vre□i?"¹³ This was the first time when someone was so forwardly rude to my informants, in front of me. The cashier never notice me in the store and the two young ladies did not have any reaction to her attitude. This was a regular day grocery shopping, they took their

¹² A village store is a privately own by the family, and it's location is usually at the basement or an old garage in their yard. You cannot just pick yo your products you must wait for the owner to serve you.

¹³ "What more do you want God dam it". This is not the typical customer service for Romania.

products, greed shyly as they were the ones who have a fault because they were in the store. The cashier attitude visibly changed the moment a non-Roma student came to buy something, she smiled, asked about her family, about her school and plans for going to high school.

Another cause for the Roma not being fully integrated in the modern European society is the communication issues that exist between Roma and non-Roma. I noticed many Roma students and parents who did not understand the information given to them by teachers, even though they pretend they do; examples: for *Child's day* (1 June) the middle school students were invited to go to an event- everybody sign in, except the Roma students, Carmen, from 8 grade. She told me that day, as we were walking back to the *La Tigani*, that she did not understand all that excitement in the school. One time a Roma mother came to school for a school record, the teacher told her she must send her children more often to school otherwise the State will stop the social allowances from the Government, she humbly said yes and left. I met with the mother in the *La Tigani* later that week and ask her about her visit to school, her answer was "These teachers all they know are to treat me with Police". They are afraid of creating any issues with non-Roma - their source of subsistence depending on them.

Romania has laws that offer specific benefits for Roma, such as designated places for enrollment in high school and university. But because many Roma are not aware of these benefits or fail to understand them, they have limited utility. Thus, we must find a way for non-Roma to offer culturally accessible information so the Roma would find the material easy to understand and they would be more comfortable with those who deliver it, rather than threatened by them. I believe if they will be able to have a high school Roma graduate from this *La Tigani*,

it will be a step forward, they could see hope for them, an example. One person from the community must be trained in order to deliver information. Carmen, the only student in the 8 grade, is the second Roma ever enrolled to high-school from the *La Tigani*. She has the support of one teacher from the village and couple teachers from the city; also the Political Roma Party from the city is in touch with her. Carmen moved in the city less than a month ago and here she started her freshman year in high-school. Carmen can become the "voice" for her neighborhood.

Another reason for the lack of Roma integration is the power of the *self-fulfillment prophecies*¹⁴ not just among Roma, but also among non-Roma, who believes that Roma "should always know their place in society." That is, they should always "stay in the back of the classroom, and at the outskirts of the community" since they are the lower class of the country.

I do not believe Romania needs more laws for Roma they need something applicable not just for Roma but mostly for the people in power positions that have contact with Roma communities: teachers, social workers, psychologists, doctors and political figures or how anthropologists called them *cultural* brokers meaning a person who facilitates the border crossing of another person or group of people from one culture to another culture (Jezewski in Jezewski & Sotnik, 2001). These cultural brokers from this community can represent leisure between Rom/Non-Roma community by gaining the trust of the Roma and already having a prestigious job in their community. These positions must be encouraged, trained and offered better resources in order for them to have a more successful collaboration with Roma. Teachers can get more training on how to act with their Roma students, and psychologists can complete

¹⁴ This is a concept coined by sociologist Robert K. Merton who argues that people act depending on the way they perceived the meaning they are assigned to these situations. Consequently "their behavior is determined by their perceptions and the meaning they ascribed to the situations, rather than by the situations themselves." (Merton, 1968)

the information. Psychologists should get more support from the Minister of Education and Inspector from that county in order for them to come on regular basics in these types of villages and have meetings on-on-one with the Roma students from the community. Social workers are trusted the most by Roma families because “they are kind, they say hello to us every time they see us and sometimes Mrs.Valerica¹⁵ offers us to drive us places when she sees us walking.”¹⁶

Most Roma in this community do not trust politicians, they feel used “the mayor always comes by our neighborhood, he stops his car, take pictures of our houses and us and leave, he never asks us anything, I do not know what he is doing with those pictures or how he use our image for his own interest” a Roma father stated. Even though the things are changing and improving, not just the non-Roma but also the Roma, maintain the belief that this ethnicity will never going to pass a certain stage, that's why they still have restrictions.

It seems inescapable that this poorly understood ethnic group would be far less mysterious if we give less credence to what some scholars have proclaimed to be an inherent Roma incapacity for assimilation, due to their dramatically unique cultural values. Without trying to dismiss or even lower the importance of other scholars work on Roma, I would argue that a far more intriguing and productive focus is the similarities Roma actually share with the dominant society in the country they inhabit. Surely a thousand years of proximity, coupled with a stated desire to integrate themselves into the world of their non Roma neighbors is enough to begin a new fruitful conversation with and about the Roma.

¹⁵ The pseudonym for the social worker from that area

¹⁶ During participant-observation with the Roma children

