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# ROMA CHILDREN IN COMMUNITY-BASED EUROPE

## EXPLORING THE SHAPE OF CULTURAL BOUNDARIES

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### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to explore the influence that the idea of culture has upon the building of social representations about Roma children in community-based Europe. The recent waves of discrimination against Roma (children) in most countries demonstrate that community-based Europe has problems in managing cultural diversity. Moreover, Roma children seem to tackle ethnic profiling and racial stereotyping, which puts barriers in acquiring equal education and is aggravating inter-ethnic tensions. We ask ourselves to what extent phenotypic or cultural characteristics play on the construction of social representations about Roma children. Having Goffman's reflexions about a stigmatized human being as support for our analysis, we examine the impact of stigmatisation upon Roma children's social and personal identity. We assume that ethnic stigmatization has implications on equal access to education for Roma children. Furthermore, the processes of differentiation 'inscribe' this social category in a trajectory of school failure, which affects its place in mainstream society.

*Keywords:* Roma children, education, discrimination, segregation, school failure

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### **1. Introduction**

"The approach [to building] a multicultural [society] and to living side-by-side and to enjoying each other... has failed, utterly failed", Chancellor Angela Merkel said more than two years ago [BBC-News Europe, October 17, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11559451>, accessed on 03/10/2013]. A few months later, referring to multiculturalism, David Cameron added: "Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream. We have failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong" [Presseurop, February 7, 2011, <http://www.presseurop.eu/en/content/article/492351-multiculturalism-takes-another-hit>, accessed on 03/10/2013]. Their

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critical opinions on the failure of multiculturalism were joined by other European leaders who have adopted identical views, such as French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who stated in a television interview that “we have been too concerned about the identity of the person who was arriving and not enough about the identity of the country that was receiving them” [Telegraph, February 11, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/8317497/Nicolas-Sarkozy-declares-multiculturalism-had-failed.html>, accessed on 03/10/2013]. These statements attest to the difficulties encountered by states across Europe in including minorities in mainstream society. Indeed, although significant efforts to integrate minorities and combat discrimination have been made in today’s community-based Europe, differences, disadvantages, disparaging attitudes and inequality still subsist. The Social Exclusion Indicators show that among “the “excluded, the outsiders, the people left out of mainstream society and left behind in a globalizing economy” [1], in some former communist member states belonging to the UE, the Roma face “a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion compared with the general population” [2]. Despite efforts to improve the situation of Roma people and ensure “social cohesion” inside mainstream society, society’s “state of well-functioning”, in sociologist Emile Durkheim’s terms [3], which is both the solidarity among individuals, and the social perspective guiding political action in order to ensure the well-being of all citizens, avoid disparities through policies of “positive (affirmative) actions” and “integrated approaches” (“mainstreaming”), “the socio-economic and civic status of the Roma remains unchanged” [4], or it is steadily degrading. In addition, discrimination, social and political exclusion, and ethnic segregation contribute to keeping the Roma at arm’s length and reinforcing the Roma’s *status quo*. Furthermore, at the OSCE meeting held in Warsaw in September 2012, the European Roma Rights Centre highlighted the widespread wave of racially motivated violence against the Roma across Europe. The violence the Roma have been experiencing particularly in the last two years in Slovakia, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, as well as in other countries such as Italy, Germany, France and the U.K. proves that “anti-Roma violence is an extreme manifestation of the obstacles that continue to exist against their inclusion in the new and old democracies. (...) This phenomenon seems to reflect a deep-seated animosity towards the Roma, severe social-economic dislocation, strong opposition to further immigration of Roma people and support for their exclusion” [4]. Besides, the recent protests of the Roma over refusing their children in schools (France), over the placement of Roma children into special schools on the basis of their mental disability (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Greece) respectively, illustrate that, more than their parents, Roma children face discrimination across Europe. The Report released in 2012 by the European Association for the Defense of Human Rights reads: “It is apparent that all European states are concerned, in varying degrees, with some form of *Anti-Gypsyism*. Racist political speeches, expulsions, physical violence and human rights breaches can be found in most countries. These crimes are committed by official authorities as well as by individuals.” [*Roma people in*

*Europe in the 21st century: violence, exclusion, insecurity*, 7, available at: <http://www.aedh.eu/plugins/fckeditor/userfiles/file/Discriminations%20et%20droits%20des%20minorit%C3%A9s/AEDH%20Roma%20REPORT.pdf>, accessed on 02/13/2013]. These prevailing issues reemphasize the existing negative stereotypes against Roma people throughout Europe, which contributes to keeping them at a distance. In addition, it assesses the inability of (supra-) national political structures to combat ethnic segregation, despite their efforts to implement different programs for the Roma in order to improve their socio-economic and civic status. The social and political importance of such issues encourages us to analyse the access of Roma children to education throughout community-based Europe.

In formulating the object of our study, we encounter a series of epistemological problems. The use of the generic term ‘Roma children’ obliges us to choose among different theories related to ‘ethnic minority’. At the core of our reflection on ‘Roma children’ lies an approach which considers ‘ethnic minority’ as the social construction of a form of classification among others. At the same time, we consider the members of an ‘ethnic minority’ in a relationship of interaction with the other(s). Fredrik Barth’s theory of ‘ethnicity’ [5] is the support of our thoughts. Inspired by the work of the interactionist sociologist Erving Goffman, anthropologist Fredrik Barth points out in his book *Ethnic groups and boundaries* that one should not consider ‘ethnicity’ as an ‘objective essence’. According to Barth’s theory, objectifying the difference does not define ‘ethnicity’, but the interrelations between groups: “In 1969, (...) I argued that ethnic groups are not groups formed on the basis of shared culture, but rather the formation of groups on the basis of differences of culture. To think of ethnicity in relation to one group and its culture is like trying to clap with one hand. The contrast between ‘us’ and ‘others’ is what is embedded in the organization of ethnicity: an otherness of the others that is explicitly linked to the assertion of cultural differences. So let us start by rethinking culture, the ground from which ethnic groups emerge”. [F. Barth, *Ethnicity and the concept of culture*, 1995, <http://www.mendeley.com/research/ethnicity-and-the-concept-of-culture/>, accessed on 10/26/2011.] This approach to ethnicity from an interactionist perspective will be related to the concept of ‘stigma’ theorized by Erving Goffman in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* [6].

Consequently, by using this theoretical background, we deem ethnic identity as a “stigma”. According to such an approach, we are interested in the individuals’ perception of the social role they play in society. By considering society from an interactionist point of view, we endeavour to find out to what extent individuals are aware of their social role, as a response to the expectations of other individuals of whom society is made up. From Goffman’s perspective, social roles may lead to the forging of a stigma-based social identity. In his view, ‘stigma’ refers to “the individual’s situation which something disqualifies and prevents from being fully accepted” [6, p. 4]. On the other hand, ‘stigma’ is not an attribute, but ‘a point of view’: “The normal and the stigmatized individuals are not persons, but points of view. These points of view are socially

occasioned by mixed contacts.” [6, p. 161] Referring to this definition, Françoise Lorcerie claims that “stigmatisation is an active process of attributing the place of the normal, as well as the minority individual to their common symbolic universe” [7]. With this in mind, and concurrently considering that individuals are victims of social judgement, we argue that the individual’s encapsulation in a specific social category may lead to stigmatisation. By further elaborating on Goffman’s theory, our aim is to understand the relationship between the individual’s social belonging and stigmatisation. In other words, we are interested in the individual’s ‘virtual social identity’ (‘the expected social identity’), according to the terms employed by sociologist. By agreeing that stigmata does not exist in itself, but, conversely, emerges when the relations between personal attributes and stereotypes are established, we think that the stigmatization process contains a form of ‘symbolic violence’ [8] exerted on the stigmatized person.

Taking Roma children as a target group, we claim that stigmatization inscribes this category in a trajectory of school failure, which affects their place in society. ‘Ethnic stigmatisation’, according to Bourdieu, or ‘tribal stigmatisation’, according to Goffman, as a social process of differentiation by categorisation becomes intelligible in a context in which interaction occurs. Consequently, the analysis of the process of Roma children’s stigmatisation will consider three major dimensions of social interaction.

1. *The micro-social level*: by taking into account the role played by culture in the interaction between individuals, this level of our analysis is related to the way in which the social actor inscribes the other in a difference in interactive situations. The interactionist perspective enables us to understand ‘culture’ as a set of categorizations and interpretations at work in social interactions. The analysis of the culturalization of the other’s behaviour implies the study of social discourses in relation to the other, as well as the categorizations and interpretations of the stigmatized individual in cultural and social terms. This axis also concerns the social actors’ lived experience, which may highlight the feelings experienced by those whose suffering is caused by ethno-racial stereotypes. In other words, this axis is strictly related to the manner in which ‘personal identity’ is constructed. Therefore, the micro-social level of social interaction presupposes a dual reading grid: one is related to the social actors responsible for reproducing ethno-racial stereotyping discourses, the other is related to those who are assigned the social role of stigmatized individuals. The latter case refers to Roma children whose social and cultural visibility places them in relations of power and domination.
2. *The median level of social interaction*: by placing the analysis of social interactions at this level, we refer to a larger context which goes beyond the social relationships between individuals, in favour of an analysis of the relationships between institutions and individuals and vice-versa. Considering that schools play a significant role in influencing the students’ progress due to the fact that they take specific educational decisions, our

goal is to see them tightly related to Roma children. The purpose of such an analysis is to identify the role played by schools in reformulating and restoring the stereotyped discourses promoted by individuals in society as a whole and the direct effects of their actions upon Roma children's period of instruction. Highlighting the resistance and 'empowerment' strategies of the individuals exposed to discrimination, exclusion and stigmatization is an important aspect of the relationship between institutions and Roma children.

3. *The macro-social level*: considering that the state is in charge of promoting education policies for the majority and the minority alike, the analysis establishes a relationship between politics, power and culture. Our goal is to identify the configuration of education policies in multicultural or intercultural states from a global and structural perspective. Also, we are interested in identifying the initiatives of reformulating these policies at the level of international institutions that protect Roma children's right to education in the EU, some of them having an important role in implementing a series of educational actions by promoting public policies across Europe.

## **2. On discrimination against Roma children**

### ***2.1. From physical mistreatment to symbolic violence***

Telling examples from Poland and Spain, "where an 11-year-old Roma girl, who was attacked by other eight children, had to change schools, because her aggressors were defended by a teacher and by the other children's parents", show that "Roma children are often insulted or injured, sometimes beaten, by other students or non-Roma teaching staff" [European Association for the Defense of Human Rights, *Roma people in Europe in the 21st century: violence, exclusion, insecurity*, October, 2012, 32, <http://www.aedh.eu/plugins/fckeditor/userfiles/file/Discriminations%20et%20droits%20des%20minorit%C3%A9s/AEDH%20Roma%20REPORT.pdf>, accessed on 02/13/2013]. However, violence against Roma children is not confined to physical abuses. The problems that Roma children face in school are connected with the representations of Roma people in general. Margareta Matache, CEO of the NGO Romani CRISS, elaborates on these problems in an interview published in the Romanian press. As a Roma woman coming from a modest family, her view from the inside reveals a scale of values on which Roma children belong to the category of 'inferior persons': "In order for Roma young people to succeed, they have to overcome both their teachers' and peers' prejudices. One cannot overlook the humiliating situations that Roma teenagers face in school. Many Romanian teachers find it difficult to understand how hard it is for a Roma child or teenager to live along with the majority that frequently reminds them that they come from an 'inferior' group and how Roma children become aware of this stigma" [Evenimentul zilei, April 09, 2012, <http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/este->

essential-ca-toti-copiii-romi-sa-aiba-sansa-sa-mearga-la-scoala-975871.html, accessed on 03/08/2013]. As a stereotype, 'inferior' is endorsed by the majority's responses to this article, according to which Roma are 'the pariah of society', they belong to 'the slave caste', they are 'uneducated'. Georges Herbert Mead [9] explains the inferior-superior polarization by claiming that any affirmation of the self in social life implies comparative value judgements. In other words, any posturing is established in relation to the other, which is inevitably conducive to classifications. From Goffman's perspective, 'virtual social identity', or 'the other's identity', points to 'collective beliefs' which enables the maintenance of hierarchy. Instead, "claimed identity", "real social identity" or "self-identity", to use Goffman's terms [6, p. 12], i.e. what Roma people feel about their own identity, the way in which they have become fully aware of their inferiority, fall under 'the power of a symbolic violence'. In this respect, Pierre Bourdieu speaks about "a power which imposes (...) legitimate meanings, dissimulating the power relations it exerts" [10]. By imposing itself as legitimate, this social order constructed by the majority forces Roma people to claim back "the desire for acknowledging (...) human nature" [11]. Under these circumstances, inferiority is thought to be felt as stigma. Their exclusion from the normal social world is the effect of stigma upon their social identity. Hence the need to be accepted as 'people'. Viewed from the inside, non-acceptance turns the Roma's destiny into fatality. Relying on other 'collective beliefs', the respondents to the interview given by Margareta Matache foreground the existence of a 'Gypsy culture'. It is responsible for 'the bad habits of the ethnic group', more specifically for different types of conduct, such as 'discourtesy', 'offences', 'thievery', 'begging', etc. To put it differently, it generates 'antisocial facts'. Sociologically, 'Gypsy culture' is explained by the notion of 'habitus', that is, dispositions which generate individual or collective practices, "the complex process by which we are both acting and taking action" [12]. Other voices of the majority relate the Roma's situation not with a certain cultural disposition, but their 'empowerment' incapacity which "tends to imitate the Romanian intellectuals who make a fuss for advertising purposes", as well as the uninterested "Roma bourgeoisie" [who] displays its wealth ostentatiously (...) rather than distinguishing itself through acts of philanthropy, such as the massive investment in intellectual infrastructure" [Evenimentul zilei, April 09, 2012, <http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/este-esential-ca-toti-copiii-romi-sa-aiba-sansa-sa-mearga-la-scoala-975871.html>, accessed on 03/08/2013]. Granting that these are the value judgements about Roma people perceived as a monolithic conglomerate, their children can hardly go beyond social representations.

## ***2.2. What schools for what kind of Roma children?***

Being systematically misdiagnosed of mental disability is the common situation for Roma children in many countries like Greece, Estonia, Slovakia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Bulgaria or Hungary. A recent report on Roma people in contemporary Europe points out that in the aforementioned

countries “Roma children who suffer no handicap are placed in special classes meant for mentally handicapped children”. For instance, in Bulgaria and Hungary, “in November 2011, Roma represented more than 60% of students in special institutions designed for mentally incapacitated children” [according to the Report *Roma people in Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, p. 32]. In Romania, the present government’s initiative to establish a high-school meant for Roma teenagers is excoriated by the CEO of Romani CRISS in the above-mentioned interview. She argues that the decision has not yet been thoroughly examined. Situated in a communist military base, the high-school was established ‘just like ANR, it was a meretricious initiative, a hoax’. According to the CEO, “the big problem is that the representatives of ethnic minorities in Parliament fail to make the difference between a right granted by the Constitution, i.e. the acknowledgement of the minorities’ rights, and the social inclusion of a disadvantaged group marked by a history of discrimination”. The schooling of a group of Roma children in a police station from a suburbia in Lyon, France, is yet another recent case of discrimination. The City Hall and the Prefect’s Office explained the situation by invoking “the inability to instruct those children in overloaded municipal schools” [Le Progres, January 30, 2013, <http://www.leprogres.fr/rhone/2013/01/30/la-scolarisation-d-enfants-roms-dans-les-memes-locaux-que-la-police-cree-le-buzz>, accessed on 08/03/2013]. A militant quoted by the Romanian press [Ziare.com, January 29, 2013, <http://www.ziare.com/articole/scoala+copii+rromi>, accessed on 03/08/2013] contradicts the foregoing statements, arguing that the local authorities banked on the (even forced) relocation of the camp.

The incident covered by both the French and Romanian press gave birth to similar reaction on the part of the majority from both countries. Their attitude ranges from mockery, “The state should have instructed them at the Hilton Hotel” to the incrimination of the NGOs, which are cut off from reality, as otherwise they would understand “le pourquoi du comment” differently, as well as the support given to the actions of the municipalities which “do whatever they can”. Voices from Romania suggest that the idea of getting them used to the police station is good as a future form of learning. These responses to newspaper articles hide ethnic profiling and racial stereotyping. In France, like in other countries such as Spain or Portugal, school enrolment for non-Roma children is refused. According to a newspaper article [B1, January 25, 2013, <http://www.b1.ro/stiri/externe/fran-a-inscrierea-la-coala-a-13-copii-romi-interzisa-de-catre-primarul-unei-suburbii-a-parisului-48378.html>, accessed on 03/10/2013], the access of a group of Roma Children to an educational institution in Ris-Orangis, a commune on the southern outskirts of Paris, was denied. Following the human rights organizations’ protests, the children were accepted in an annex of the school. In its public statement, “Amnesty International is concerned that the French authorities are failing to ensure that Romani pupils can enjoy their right to education without any discrimination”. In addition, it mentions that “discrimination in the area of education is prohibited by the international human rights law, including the International Covenant on

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR: Articles 2.2 and 13), the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR: Protocols 1, 12 and Article 14) and the Revised European Social Charter (ESC: Articles 17.2 and E).” [Amnesty International, *France: authorities should ensure that Romani pupils are not segregated at school-Public Statement*, released on February 14, 2013, <http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR21/002/2013/en>, accessed on 03/15/2013].

The public institutions, educational institutions, city halls, prefect’s offices and the police play a crucial role both in intensifying or easing the tensions arisen in multicultural contexts. Through their actions towards Roma children, they may stop or spread racial mistreatment. Nevertheless, data shows that in some countries such as France, there is a tendency to exclude Roma children from mainstream schools where their attendance is not allowed, whilst in many other countries Roma children are accepted in schools for children with special needs. The recent protests of Roma children in the Czech Republic show that they have the ability of ‘empowerment’. Their ‘acting together’ with the purpose of contesting their special situation within the educational system articulates and creates new symbolic configurations of the interaction with both public institutions and society as a whole. But the way to become advocates for social change is not obvious.

### ***2.3. Fostering inter-ethnic cohesion through policies***

National States have a great responsibility in combating discrimination. In addition, supranational bodies, such as the European Commission (EC) and the Council of Europe (COE), play an important role in drafting Roma integration policies. Moreover, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has influenced Romani policy formation since the early 1990s. In order to improve the Roma’s access to education, housing, health services and employment, the European Commission launched the European Union framework project for national Roma integration strategies. In accordance with the recommendations formulated at supranational level, States across Europe define their national plans concerning Roma. Despite their effort to improve the access of Roma children to equal education, ethnic discrimination and segregation contribute to keeping them away from mainstream society. This statement is sustained by recent recriminations of the state-enforced segregation of Roma children within the education system on the basis of their linguistic and/or cultural differences, by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in countries such as Hungary (‘the Mr. Horvath and Mr. Kiss’ case in 2006), the Czech Republic, (‘the DH and others v Czech Republic’ case on November 13, 2007), Greece (‘the Sampanis and others v. Greece’ case in June 2008), Croatia (‘the Orsus and Others v Croatia’ case of March 16, 2010). According to the European Association for the Defense of Human Rights Report about Roma people, released on October 2012, [<http://www.aedh.eu/plugins/fckeditor/userfiles/file/Discriminations%20et%20droits%20des%20minorit%C3%A9s/EN>

\_%20AEDH%20Summary%20Roma%20Report.pdf, accessed on 02/13/2013] - “The European Court of Human Rights has found in many instances that educating Romani children in separate Roma-only classes or schools as well as placing them in establishments for children with mild mental disabilities amounted to discrimination in the exercise of the right to education”. In addition, in his Report released on 21 February 2013, following his visit to the Czech Republic from 12 to 15 November 2012 [<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/513d94bf2.html>, p. 2-3], Nils Muižnieks, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, “deeply regrets that five years after the judgment of the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of *D.H. v. the Czech Republic*, Roma children remain segregated in the education system, (...) calls on the authorities to adhere to the Consolidated Action Plan adopted last November and stresses the necessity of a paradigm shift that would put emphasis not on perfecting pupils’ capacity tests but on the inclusion of all pupils in mainstream education and the provision to them of appropriate support, if necessary”. That the Czech Republic is not an isolated case shows the states’ inability or ill will in addressing issues of segregation or discrimination in matters of education.

### **3. Conclusion**

The interaction between individuals, which constitutes the first level of analysis, has shown that some voices of the majority consider inferiority a cultural characteristic of Roma people. In addition, historically and socially elaborated predispositions determine a certain type of behaviour. Once the group becomes conscious of it, the Roma perceive inferiority as stigma. Under these circumstances, ‘assigned social identity’ gives birth to a ‘symbolic violence’ exerted upon ‘claimed identity’, which is conducive to the maintenance of the Roma’s *status quo* and of interethnic boundaries. The second level of the interaction analysis has demonstrated that repeated discrimination based on ethnic origins may lead to physical and moral abuses. On the other hand, placing Roma children in schools for children with special needs is a form of segregation from the mainstream education system, which hampers the equal access to education. Furthermore, the rhetoric of exclusion and stigmatization, as well as the opposition ‘us’/‘them’ promoted not only at individual but also institutional level influences Roma educational achievement. In this context, education is far from being an inclusive system. The third level of analysis shows that the current national educational frameworks do not meet the needs of Roma children as a marginalized group. The states across Europe continue to segregate/ to ghettoize children from Roma communities by willingly promoting schools for children with special needs, which later on leaves its mark on the Roma’s inclusion in social life. Moreover, the failure of the education system marks a political crisis. This no longer refers to Roma children, but to Roma communities living across Europe.

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