

Guest Editor's Introduction: On the Road—The Roma Between Disadvantage and Empowerment

Dana Moree¹

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Being Roma is a difficult destiny in many of the contexts where this minority group lives. Roma populations have repeatedly been treated as second rate inhabitants in many European countries for many years. From the perspective of Central and Eastern Europe we can even say that the situation of this minority group worsened after the political changes of 1989.

However, we must also be critical of our own perspective. We have become used to perceiving Roma as disadvantaged and we sometimes forget that being disadvantaged does not necessarily mean being a helpless victim.

I chaired presentations on Roma issues for quite some years at the European Educational Research Association annual conference and I learned that two sorts of research are conducted on the Roma population: research that tries to put itself in the shoes of the Roma and analyze the world from their perspective and research that approaches from outside and tries to describe what is going on with this group from an “expert” position. The discussions after those conference presentations very often mirrored this dilemma and looked for the most ethical way to approach this issue. Furthermore, years of research have resulted in relatively detailed knowledge about Roma populations and the mechanisms that lead to their disadvantaged positions, as well as about differences between particular countries. Despite the amount that we now know about the Roma situation, this minority still lives in disadvantaged conditions. There is little more we can know, and yet our knowledge does not often help to improve concrete people’s real situation. Why is this?

This special issue is an attempt to reflect on this experience from several perspectives. To achieve our aim we set several criteria for the articles that were to be included in this special issue: we wanted to collect research in which the fact that

✉ Dana Moree
dana.moree@fhs.cuni.cz

¹ Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

someone was born as Roma is perceived as normal. Ethnicity is perceived as a fact that has certain consequences in the lives of particular people. These consequences are given by the reactions of the outside world and are not caused by ethnicity itself. We wanted to collect research that was strongly rooted in context. Lastly, we tried to collect research in which the researcher was a natural part of the environment that he or she was analysing. The methodological consequence of this is that we lose a bit of analytical distance. We are aware of this and openly admit it. As the authors of this special issue, we admit that we have all been touched by what we have seen and experienced during our research and that we have actively looked for ways to overcome the disadvantages we have faced.

I would like to add one more aspect that I personally perceive as difficult in research focusing on marginalized groups. The very fact that we are able to conduct research into a disadvantaged group means that we are ourselves representatives of a privileged one. We have the money to conduct such research, the capacity to use the data and write articles, and the social capital that makes the publication of such articles possible. This can cause us to have a kind of shame. Conducting such research means that we must accept the fact that the world is divided into disadvantaged and privileged groups, and that this distinction is strongly influenced by skin color and ethnicity—usually in combination. At the same time, it is possible to see this situation from a slightly different perspective. Although there are advantages and disadvantages caused by skin colour, we all share a single problem: we do not like it. We stand against it and we each try to overcome it using the tools available to us. This special issue is an attempt to contribute to the debate by stressing the perspective of those who are disadvantaged, and at the same time by collecting examples that show that this kind of disadvantage does not have to be a life-long destiny: it can be changed. We have collected articles that explore this main point in several ways. The issue is divided into three parts, each of which reflects on certain aspects of Roma research and realities.

The special issue opens with two methodological papers by Federica Setti and Martin Levinson. Federica Setti analyses what it means to be Roma/Sinti or Gypsy in the context of ethnographic research. Martin Levinson puts Roma research into the context of participatory action research and analyses its advantages and disadvantages.

The second part features articles that present research from different parts of Europe and combine a wide range of methods. Yasar Kondakci presents field research carried out in an urban school with a high population of Roma children from disadvantaged areas. His findings question the aim of the education process and our ability to adapt it from a privileged perspective to these families' situation.

Francesca Gobbo conducted research among traveler families in Italy and brings us examples of several projects that shed new light on the education system. In a similar way to Yasar Kondakci, she shows that change is possible when the people in power are open to it.

Panagiota Gkofa carried out qualitative research among Roma university students in Greece. These successful young people came up with a set of ideas based on their own experiences about changes that might help other young people to start studying.

Helen Avery contributes with an article comparing the situation of Roma in the education systems in Sweden and Albania. She reflects on the Roma language in the field of education and presents her research in the Roma communities in these two countries.

The final section differs from the others by presenting experimental research methods. Markéta Levinská and David Doubek followed the story of “Alice”, a Roma woman from a disadvantaged area in the Czech Republic, for eight years and they narrate Alice’s transition from a disadvantaged position to empowerment. The implications are clear—how can we help more stories like Alice’s to appear in the world?

The last article returns to the very first question addressed by Federica Setti—what does it mean to be Roma in our societies? A group of Roma and non-Roma worked together in the Czech Republic using the Theatre of the Oppressed method. The way this mixed group coped with and reflected upon the disadvantages and privileges linked with ethnicity was fascinating. Together with my colleagues Tereza Vávrová and Alena Felcmanová, I present an analysis of these processes.

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