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ABSTRACT

Our paper is based on a study carried out among students of Hungarian *tanodas* – second chance educational institutions in Hungary – and their parents. The findings of the interview research did not support deficit models and suggest that schooling is a vital issue for both Roma/Gypsy families and their children. All families have limited resources and opportunities to achieve desired goals, and despite their strong intent and determination, they often seem to lack a clear vision of the steps to be taken. Our results show that children have to cope with negligence, stigmatization, exclusion, discrimination, etc. Turning to *tanodas* for help has become a sort of coping strategy in and of itself. We could identify, as common parental strategies, the 'squeezing out' of the maximum available scarce opportunities, building on social networks, and monitoring their children's studies. Students' coping mechanisms regarding identity-threats were more varied and ranged from confrontation via proxy control and social support, to disengaging from school and taking on a negative identity or, the opposite, taking up positive roles.

Introduction

The present paper, based on research carried out in *tanodas* in 2012[1] aims to present how Roma children in three Budapest *tanodas*, and their parents, cope with the adversity associated with being a stigmatized and discriminated group with low socio-economic status. It discusses what goals these individuals set in terms of schooling and career, and how they try to achieve these goals. A *tanoda*[2] is an afterschool program and activity center in Hungary, mostly organized by civil and religious organizations, and partly financed by state grants. Since the end of the 1990's, *tanodas* have been studied from the perspectives of, for instance, pedagogy, sociology of education, and educational policy (Beres 2017; Messing 2008; Németh 2009, 2013). In some way or

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another, all studies underlined the beneficial impacts of *tanodas*, such as improving students' academic achievement, increasing their motivation to study, providing them with a safe and friendly space with a tolerant and family-like atmosphere, just to mention a few.

Roma/Gypsy families and schooling

Romas/Gypsies can be considered a "caste-like", 'involuntary minority' (Ogbu and Simons 1998; Moldenhawer 2014), suffering from structural inequality, ethnic stigmatization, and discrimination. Recently, several authors have referred to discriminative school practices that lead Roma/Gypsy parents to withdraw their kids from school (Foster and Norton 2012) or keep them away because of the ethnocentric perspective of educational systems (Gómez and Vargas 2003).

The underachievement of Roma/Gypsy students, as well as those from low socioeconomic families, has been the subject of numerous studies and programs since the 1960's. In general, these have had little impact. Recently, in addition to theories on the lack of equal chances and the social exclusion of Romas/Gypsies, a growing number of studies has described the relationship between the culture of Roma/Gypsy families and formal schools as a mismatch; not only different, but in fact conflictual and hardly reconcilable (e.g. Formoso 2000; Károlyi 2007 etc.). Many scholars also claim that Roma/Gypsy parents simply can't support their children's school career because of poverty and the lack of cultural capital, (Kertesi and Kézdi 2014) and/or attach no positive value to education (e.g. Peček and Munda 2016). Deficit theories, however, have been challenged by other studies that provide evidence of a positive shift in parental attitudes towards formal education (e.g. Havas, Kemény, and Liskó 2001) and show that most parents think schooling is *crucial* in respect to the future of their children and the larger family (Boreczky 2009).

Acculturation and coping strategies of Roma/Gypsy students and their families

Gypsies/Romas are one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Eastern Europe. Their presence as sedentary, indigenous groups, who migrated to the region hundreds of years ago, contributes to the creation of 'a unique and unusual context of acculturation' (Dimitrova and Lebedeva 2016, 272). Gypsies/Romas in Hungary have been through many stages or forms of acculturation, so for our research it was deemed more relevant to investigate how one of the most characteristic acculturation orientations, which aims at integration into Hungarian society, affects a minority's coping behaviours and preferences.

The *stress-coping framework* (Ward, Furnham, and Bochner 2001) can help shed light on the findings in the present research. This approach is based on the classic work of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who claimed that individuals facing a similar external impulse (e.g. a stressor) can have different experiences and react differently, in (a) primary appraisal, namely the perception of a situation as a threat; and

a (b) secondary appraisal that is the evaluation and assessment of one's resources to respond. Both levels of appraisal are directly related to coping, though in different ways. The findings from Yoo and Lee (2005) and Kuo, Roysircar, and Newby-Clark (2006) studies also suggest that coping strategies among ethnic and migrant youth vary along acculturation orientations and the social resources available to them in the dominant/host society.

As far as *identity threat* of stigmatized minorities and their coping strategies are concerned, these have been the focus of scientific discourse and social psychology research (Major and O'Brien 2005; Crocker and Garcia 2006) for several decades. Some coping mechanisms, such as blaming discrimination versus blaming oneself, disengagement versus striving, group identification versus dis-identification (Major and O'Brien 2005) have already been distinguished. To cope with threats to their personal or collective self-image, stigmatized individuals can choose between confronting or overlooking prejudice, concealing their stigma, being vigilant towards early signs of discrimination (and then taking defensive steps to avoid it), stifling complaints, or withdrawing from the situation. Disengagement and withdrawal, as well as dis-identifying with areas where Romas/Gypsies face negative stereotypes and unfair treatment can also be a way of coping with identity threat (Major and O'Brien 2005). If schools represent such an institutional identity threat, over time one's sense of self-worth is no longer attached to – and as a consequence not threatened by – a lack of academic success. However, despite psychological relief, this can have detrimental consequences for educational and career prospects. A special form of identity threat originates from a *low achievement stereotype*. Paradoxically, *stereotype threat* has a greater impairing effect on students who want to achieve than on the ones who are less motivated (Steele 2010).

Besides dealing with the negative experiences of identity threat and stigmatization, minority students tend to struggle with educational attainment. Children of minority groups use different educational strategies in such cases (Moldenhawer 2014; Szalai and Schiff 2014).[3] The very few Roma/Gypsy students who attend ethnically mixed schools with no explicit discrimination, often develop a *strategy of commitment*, recognizing that education is a means of social mobility, and work hard to make up for structural disadvantages. *Strategies of instrumentation* characterize students from families with low socioeconomic status. Based on the family's low socioeconomic status, children are frequently categorized as socially, and often mentally, disadvantaged, and suffer from educational segregation. As a consequence, they become discouraged and lose confidence in their ability to succeed in their studies at all, which, in other respects, they deem very important for their future. A school, however, is a social place where they can positively identify, e.g, with peers (Feischmidt 2013). Other strategies such as the *strategy of opposition*, as part of an oppositional culture and language frame (see counterculture, Ogbu and Simons 1998), is frequently adopted by minority students coming from the most disadvantaged, and most discriminated and marginalized groups.

Moreover, in the case of low socioeconomic status Roma/Gypsy families and their children in Hungary, a study of successful Roma in Hungary by Székelyi et al. (2005) points to the lack of a clearly identifiable path leading to success. The authors used as a working definition of success the completion of a secondary vocational school or more. Their findings suggest the absence of 'beaten paths' to success among the Roma population in Hungary. The authors assert that, besides personal competences and the motivation of individual students, accidental factors play a large role in breaking through barriers of social determination that cause academic failure, early school drop-out, and unequal opportunities in Roma students' long-term academic careers (p. 28). Parental motivation regarding their children's education seems to have limited impact on children's educational attainment, though it does, however, play a crucial role at the school level. If a child's homeroom teacher realizes that parents are highly motivated, he/she will pay special attention to the child's educational achievement, which tends to lead to better school performance.

Method

Sample and data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 *tanoda* students between the ages of 11 and 17 (44.4% girls; 55.6% boys, mean age: 14.0, Std dev:1,68) and 14 of their parents. With one exception, parental interviews were conducted with mothers, whose age ranged from 32 to 41 years (mean 36.4, Std. dev:2.27). All student interviewees attended three *tanodas* in Budapest. Each interview took 90 minutes on average. and focused on five major themes:

- family socialization,
- school socialization,
- experiences and achievements in the *tanodas*,
- social relationships and
- views of the *pupils, their parents* and the *tanodas* about the future.

Data analysis

The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). First, initial codes were generated from the data set after careful reading and rereading the transcription of the interviews. As a next step, potential themes were created from the initial codes and were refined while checking their significance and their relation to the data.

Findings

Schooling is ubiquitously deemed vital, while articulation of goals and strategies to achieve them vary

All interviews suggest that parents regarded *schooling as vital* for their children`s future career. As a consequence, what they expected from their children was either a high school maturity examination or a secondary level vocational school certificate. Schooling was highly valued among the interviewees. As one parent put it: '…*her task is to study, study, study…*'.

As the following extract from parental interviews illustrates, not only did schooling become a crucial issue; in a number of families it has also challenged the top priority of having children – one of their core values, and a symbol of life and a part of old age security- before finishing school.

> What I really want him to do is study, nothing but study. I told him to forget about having a wife at the age of 16-17-18. As long as I live, surely not.[…] You must study. While I live he must study…

A mother speaks from her own bitter experience:

> …I always tell my child, "Do you want to be like me? How will you provide for your family?"..I tell him "How will you have a family if you do not study?

While schooling was ubiquitously deemed essential in families, significant differences appeared in terms of the *articulation of their goals and their strategies to achieve them*. In several cases, parents and/or children did not have a clear view of potential career options: further education was a general wish, expressed without actual or concrete plans:

> Q: In order to become what you want to become, what kind of schools do you have to finish?
>
> A: Well, I don't know

Or:

> Q: Do you know what you have to do to fulfil your dream?
>
> A: I don't know. It's complicated.

There were some cases though, in which a path with consciously constructed stages was expressed:

> We think it is feasible that I can get a grant after I finish high school.
>
> Q. Is it all to study dentistry?
>
> A.Yes.

A *tanoda* could provide specific help in carrying out the plan:

"Everyone in the family is very happy, because I am going to the tanoda and maybe this thing about becoming a chef can work out. I have been saying since I was a little boy, that I want to be a chef."

"I have to get at least a four (grade 4 is Good on a scale from 1 to 5) in biology to be admitted. I am trying to get it now."

Protecting the children and keeping them out of trouble

The results showed that expectations regarding school attainment were often combined with, and modified by, an overall concern and anxiety about the children. This was illustrated by parental choices to send them to the school nearest to their home. Even with respect to vocational schools, where children were already 14–15 years old, distance seemed to be a key factor in school choice. As one mother put it in her decision to keep her child closer to home: 'I would not even let him go alone to the tram station in that area.'

Parents were concerned about all kinds of perceived threats *outside the home*. They worried a lot about bullying and discrimination, about smoking and drinking alcohol, about drugs or joining the wrong crowd, which could lead to crime. Parents' fears and attempts to keep their children 'out of trouble' were frequently mentioned by the children as well: …I should not become a pimp, a drug dealer, these kinds of things…(they would object). There was a clear expectation of respect and parents were quite rigorous when it came to school problems (poor grades, lack of effort etc.) or if their children were deemed at risk. In most families, the parental style was *authoritative*. A high degree of *control* was mixed with a more *permissive* parental attitude. In a few cases, parents mentioned *restorative approaches*: they expected their children to repair norm transgressions themselves.

Last year Renato did something after I allowed him to go to the store […] he immediately took a liking to something and took it […]. I asked him who allowed him to take it. 'But I did not pay.' – he replied. Well, that's a problem. I insisted he take the chewing gum […] go back to the shop and give it back to the cashier. He went back to the store and he had to put the packs of gum on the counter. The cashier asked: 'what's this? And I told my son to tell her, and he did. Both of them were a little bit upset and went crazy.

Protecting the child also took the form of family interventions. When conflicts emerged with teachers, students frequently called their mother, sometimes their grandmother, who would take the side of their children against alleged discriminatory acts by teachers:

Once my Grandma came to school, because the teacher did not speak to me in a respectful way. I called Grandma, she talked to the teacher and then the teacher started yelling at her. Grandma did not accept this. Then another parent came in. and

> then other parents came in. Why can't they communicate nicely with the kids. My Mom also came... .

> ...the teachers are somehow afraid of me, ...I will not repeat the bad words my Mom said...so my Mom came in, and since then, she (the teacher) has not....

Other parents, however, chose the opposite route:

> when he came home, and said, Mom, the teacher was like this, like that. I said, stop! The teacher is always right.

Coping with school difficulties while means and opportunities are limited: squeezing out attention, help, and resources

Almost all coping strategies discussed and described in literature were found when we analysed the interviews among students and parents. Turning to the *tanoda* for help was a sort of strategy in and of itself. Since not all Roma/Gypsy children attend a *tanoda*, going there is a selective process. It is a sign of higher motivation to succeed academically. Limited means, resources and opportunities that could help children achieve educational goals are common to all families – whether they have plans or not. Parents sometimes desperately struggle to surmount immense difficulties. A single mother emotionally shared her story:

> I raise them (two boys) by myself. We are lost. It is so hard to face the world (...) Mentally it ruins you. You wish you could give something, but you cannot. It is terrible.

The same mother tried to support her sons' studies by closely following them, by fighting for teachers to pay attention to her children at school, and for help by the *tanoda*:

> I had to go there a lot, to fight a lot, I had to push them hard to pay attention to my child and to help him develop.

Thus, help is badly needed. A relative, a neighbour, an elder child who did well at school, and often the staff of the *tanoda* can be of great help. As one student commented ...my uncle's girlfriend, she would help me. If I am not that good in a subject, she helps me in it. The homeroom teacher who is in charge of the child's class can also be a great source of support for families to lean on:

> An angel, very helpful, very calm, who adores children, she can deal with children so well, hats off to her! I have hardly ever seen such a helpful teacher. Whatever we needed help for, we called Miss A., and she told us right away what should be done.

In all the families we met, the mother was the person in charge of the child's learning. Sometimes the grandmother, and in a few families, the mother and the father, or the mother and elder siblings, played a pivotal role as well. Even

if they were generally unfamiliar with the school setting, parents tried to follow their children's studies closely. A mother recounted:

> …I sat down with them. It is true, though that I could not help any more in Grade 8. Then he tried to explain to me so that I understand, and then we can help each other.

However, such strategies of commitment, as identified in the EDUMIGROM (Szalai and Schiff 2014) research, were only found in some families. Some children reported that they received little help, even from home:

> Q: Who is the person who paid the most attention to your school things?
>
> A: Me.
>
> Q: You, not your Mother?
>
> A: No.

However, when all else failed, disengagement and dis-identification with the school often followed. Assuming a bad kid identity was a frequent pattern among children who faced difficulties at school. A girl stated:

> …for us (the school) it is not the same as for others. We go to school (…) after the first two hours we sit together, we talk. We keep giggling. We don't go anywhere with the school. They don't take us with them, because we are bad, we behave badly.

Another student, also a girl, talked about a very similar experience:

> Well, I am not really a good child, so when I enter the classroom, teachers just they say oh, here she comes again. I just make a joke about the whole thing.

Her words might function as a self-fulfilling prophecy: if teachers hold negative expectations about children, their belief-fitting behaviours will elicit behaviours from the children that confirm their original beliefs (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968).

Facing exclusion both by teachers and peers

There were significant differences between adults and children regarding perceived discrimination. Compared to their children, parents expressed greater awareness and more experiences relating to discrimination. They were more vigilant, too. Here we focus on discriminatory practices of schools and the coping strategies of parents and children.

Being excluded in school contexts has a long history that spreads across generations:

> So, at Christmas or at any other celebration, I experienced, not only now, but even earlier, in my childhood, that teachers always made sure that not a single Gypsy child

participated in the show. So rather not. And it has always been painful for Gypsy children. And they never expect to get a role if there is a show.

Parents also indicated their children were neglected. They commented that their children received little if any individual attention from teachers and that they were excluded because of poor academic performance. Similar to a case mentioned earlier, a mother stated:

> I have noticed too often that if someone is a very good student, they (the teachers) are encouraging him or her, but those who are down (not being good students), are ignored. Do you understand what I mean?

The perception that their children were being excluded and lacked equal opportunities at school – the very place that should provide extremely scarce educational opportunities –, some parents pushed for their children to be included:

> Two little boys in the first grade – they were already in a poetry reading contest…my son can read poems very well. I asked the teacher to let him learn the poems, together with the boys, let him read the poems as well, since he wanted this. All she said was: 'Well, I will try to take that into account'.

Compared to their parents' experiences, students' experiences of discrimination were mainly related to the school environment, sometimes to extracurricular activities. One student talked about her experience of being ostracized by a handball team, a general phenomenon triggered by her group membership:

> They didn't like me because I am Roma, and this is why they excluded me. They exclude Romas/Gypsies everywhere, and they did not like me.

In some very rare cases, school staff intervention brought about a solution. A student recalled her very first day at primary school, where she was the first Gypsy girl who entered the classroom:

> We, the girls, were standing in line. (…) I was excluded. Then a teacher came in, the principal, Miss M., she was the principal, she came in, and she said if someone is Gypsy, or Hungarian, or anything, or Arabic, or Chinese, always…like a family. They came to me, everyone stood up, they talked to me, and it has been like this ever since.

Teachers, however, were sometimes seen as perpetrators, not rescuers. Roma/Gypsy students often mentioned that they never received the benefit of the doubt, e.g. during written tests at school, and that they were wrongly suspected of cheating. The belief that teachers discriminated against all Roma students was voiced often:

> I will tell you how teachers behave, not well. They are just like this: they look down on Gypsies. Last year my homeroom teacher hated a Gypsy (student), so she failed all the Gypsies in Junior High, grade 6,7,8.

Building on positive values and special roles

Emphasizing positive values (even implicitly, compared to other groups), "social creativity" has long been acknowledged as a coping strategy among negatively distinguished groups. Similar to the case of immigrant families, family-togetherness was mentioned as a great resource:

'So, sticking together, it is there, very much so in our family'

Celebrating together with the whole (extended) family is a sign of strong ties and togetherness:

'Well, it is kind of a three day party.'

Still, for many, being part of a prosperous family was only a distant memory. The move from the countryside to Budapest disrupted old social networks. Moreover, in several families single mothers raised children. In general, it was usually the mother, and in a few cases the grandmother, who kept the family together. It was the mother who monitored school performance and the struggles of the children. A girl showed her admiration for her mother as a role model with almost superhuman qualities:

> …my Mom, she is like this, no matter how ill she is, her leg is broken or whatever, she is there, she cleans, cooks, washes clothes, so, she is like God, for me she is…

Or as anothergirl phrased it:

> …partly my Mom, she is always going ahead, out of nothing she creates things. We have everything, as we have food every day, we have money, so she is building it well….

Social support was deemed essential. The highest level of support was a family-like relationship:

> I can say that, even if I have not said it clearly to others, that I consider them my family Those who are in the study room (of the tanoda) (…) I can talk to them about everything. Normally. I cannot talk with others.

For some, a sense of support and solidarity was something that only took place in the past:

> …in the past, if something happened to a Gypsy, the whole street came to the rescue, now, nothing.

Disengagement from school was a way for some to deal with negative experiences at school. Becoming a bully or a class clown areexamples of more dysfunctional social strategies:

> They saw me as a king. The school was mine. When I walked through the hallways, everyone stood close to the wall.

> All the teachers liked me, I made all of them laugh. Only this teacher does not understand my jokes.

Assuming a positive role in the school community, as was the case for one student who tried to 'bring the class together', was a less common strategy. Another student became the 'spokesperson' or class representative, since she was considered to be the most outspoken person in the class.

Discussion

Ward and Geeraert (2016) argue that while studying acculturation processes, the ecological framework, namely the different levels of ecological backgrounds, such as family, institutional, and societal levels, have to be taken into account. The families that participated in our research had moved from the countryside to the capital of Budapest for job opportunities and to improve their children's lives. Integration was a main goal in their mind. Instead of the integration many of them have longed for, they faced marginalization and segregation. However, despite the fact that most families in our sample were poor, that the parents were not highly educated, and that they had a hard life, our findings did not support a deficit framework. Instead, in the quest for integration, various coping strategies were used, including an emphasis on schooling. As most extended families had experienced some level of fragmentation, they functioned less as a reference system for schooling and career planning. Even if close family ties still existed, family members seldom had enough experience and competence regarding school related matters.

To counterbalance the adversities associated with their situation, and to grow their social capital, families and children turned to other sources of support and the *Tanoda* was definitely one of them. The *tanodas* provided connectedness and helped children perform better at school. Ambitions to integrate and succeed in mainstream society through schooling, combined with the lack of a clear understanding of how this could be achieved, resonate with the findings of Székelyi et al. (2005) and Boreczky (2009), who suggest that there is no well-beaten path taken by the Roma/Gypsy groups that families belong to. Although all families considered schooling to be vital, the goals and the steps they identified as necessary to acquire school success and an opportunity to *choose* a career varied.

Székelyi et al. (2005) have asserted that if teachers acknowledge parental motivation, they will pay special attention to the child, and this very act of paying attention can serve as a mediating factor, leading to higher school attainment. Our qualitative data suggest that parents have to fight desperately and actively to get teachers' special attention, however. This proactive move of 'squeezing' as much as possible out of the system and/or building on positive relationships with teachers, or relying on the *tanoda*'s staff and other

competent educators, does seem to belong to the 'horizons of possibilities' (as phrased by Lee and Zhou 2014) for parents. The capacity to mobilize everyone and everything that could help the child's education is crucial.

The children in our study regularly experienced exclusion. They seemed to be constant potential targets of discrimination and stigmatization by their teachers and peers. They consequently developed a certain level of vigilance when they recognized intent to harm or discriminate (see Crocker and Garcia 2006). Attributional ambiguity – not knowing if something that is said or done toward the self is a consequence of discrimination or of something else – can be perplexing, and diminish self-efficacy and achievement for stigmatized minority group members (London and Rosenthal 2013). Usually discrimination goes hand in hand with teachers' negative expectation or biases about children. When children face biases or if they fail to meet academic requirements, they easily become academically disinterested and disengaged. (see e.g. Major and O'Brien 2005; Steele 2010). Adopting a negative self-image and detaching one's sense of self-worth from success at school is a defence mechanism that hinders educational attainment and damages career prospects. Taking up special roles (being humorous, being the community builder…) seems to be a more positive strategy.

When dealing with perceived discriminatory incidents, students often use proxy control (Yamaguchi 2001) – they rely on the intervention of family members. Our findings also support Fuligni's (2012) that keeping children out of trouble, protection and family-togetherness are fundamental elements of the "immigrant paradox", even if, as we claimed before, Romas/Gypsies in Eastern Europe can hardly be considered immigrants.

Conclusions

Our research findings do not support a deficit framework. They show that schooling is ubiquitously deemed vital, while the articulation of goals and strategies to achieve them vary among the Roma/Gypsy families and their children in the *tanodas*. They have to cope with school difficulties, while the means and opportunities available to them are extremely limited. Therefore 'squeezing out' attention, seeking assistance and resources, as well as monitoring their children's studies, are common parental strategies. Protecting their children and keeping them out of trouble is as important as the educational goal itself. Discrimination and stigmatization were common experiences. Coping mechanisms against identity-threats ranged from confrontation, relying on social support networks and on interventions of family members, to disengaging from school and taking on a negative identity to, on the contrary, taking up special (positive) roles.

Our findings highlight that teachers need to become more aware of, and recognize more, the different strategies that minority students and their

parents make use of, and try to prevent responses that hinder school success and raise barriers for students to study in vocational schools, high schools or even universities.

Notes

1. We would like to thank our colleagues, Krisztina Borsfay and Kende Judit as well as our students of the Intercultural Psychology and Education MA Programme, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, for their help in data collection. Our gratitude is also extended to the families and children who participated in our research.
2. 'Tanoda' is an old Hungarian word for school.
3. The latter study, called EDUMIGROM, was carried out in 9 EU member states to better understand the educational experiences of students from the most seriously stigmatized groups: Roma in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and non-Western immigrant minorities in France, England, Germany, Sweden, and Denmark.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

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