

A SCIENTIFIC REVIEW OF ROMA COMMUNITY CULTURE, HEALTH AND LIVING CONDITIONS PRESENTED BY MEANS OF ALBANIAN STUDIES DURING THE LAST TWO DECADES

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Abstract

The paper analyses the last two decades Albanian studies focused on the culture, living conditions, services and health issues of Roma groups. The review as a methodology helps us to give evidence about treatment and expectances from Roma strength and weak points, how to overcome the health risky behavior; how near and far by the Roma Community National Strategy commented standards are the theoretical arguments given by the studies; how these arguments have been taken in consideration in rehabilitation policies for these community and how is presented on these studies the proper Roma's will and motivation for changing behavior. Stressing on the strengths and weakness of Roma culture and standards of living is the main perception for their social integration. Work, education and "the art of begging" as the big post-communist challenge of their social integration, distinguished some Roma groups from each other. The question of the social services and attitudes toward culture of health is complex and a simple prediction equation is not enough for effective interventions designed to ensure behavior change. Thus, we only benefit situations, where levels of mismatch between knowledge, attitudes and behaviors, create confusion in the perception of the risk assessments "map" and further interventions.

Part of the discussion remain also the fact that the perennial and continuous investments towards these groups seems that don't have positive results yet. The paper tries to argue which of the social psychology theories could be more valuable to lead services and decisions in achieving these results.

We could reach to an answer through coherent treatments of the given studies basic questions.

Key words: health risky behavior, culture of poverty, Roma community, integration, social status.

JEL Classification: Z10, Z13

Introduction

About "arixhin" of before '90-es and for the Roma after '90-es, is speaking too much in these two decades, especially after 2000-s. It is talking to the media, through the official language of government through the rehabilitation strategy for

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this population, but also through studies. Exactly the studies published during these years, focused on Roma population as a vulnerable group related to social, economical, political integration as well as risky behavior on health, HIV / AIDS, STI-s and drug use, are the object of this paper.

The aim of the paper is to find the relation between the studies conducted and the reported situations for Roma groups, in order to identify behaviors that have been changed (if any), or the effectiveness of services up to the Roma needs. Obviously, here should been taken in consideration the typologies of the studies done and should take into account their formal and informal marketing. There is not the purpose of this paper to evaluate the quality of the studies focused on Roma (it can be done by meta-analysis), but to rank findings and possible comparisons as the way which lead to the coherence, authenticity and investment usefulness through researches and surveys results.

The main problem is to identify how close or far by the European and other Albanian majority population standarts appear those of Roma behavior, culture and coexistence, from the studies conducted in Albania at the last two decades.

Some topical questions explored within the selected studies are: is it talking about the standard of living, culture, behavior, integration, health and services for the Roma population compared with the large population in the selected studies and where the suggestions for changing behavior are based on? Does any study intend to describe the situation of Roma groups, or to provide possible useful ways to change their behavior, related to the strategy and standards developed by the Albanian government? Why almost all issues for Roma continue to be at the point 0?

In addition we will have answers to the issues raised in the abstract.

Methodology

This paper is conceived as the review of the theories concluded from studies conducted for Roma integration, health and benefit services terms, as essential parts of national strategy for rehabilitation of this community, and also the living and the right standards.

The methodology involves a review of existing literature by purpose. As O'Malley & Arksey (2005), defined¹, the intention of using this method, is the summarizing and dissemination of existing research findings. Reviews by purpose are exploratory, so include the results of previous studies on Roma-related issues identified. The selection criterias for studies are not based on quality of studies, but due to the problem of the studies. The studies were found through keyword research: *Albanian studies, Roma, standards, health, integration, services*. So were obtained the electronic published studies as well as those published as prints, on which was requested in the archives of organizations that are involved in studies on Roma, as

¹ Arksey, H., & O'Malley, L. (2005). Scoping Studies: Towards a methodological framework. *Int.J. Social Research Methodology*, p. 8,19.32.

Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Public Opinion Studies Institute (POSI), "Vatra" Center, Public Health Institute, UNICEF, World Vision, Terre des Home, etc. The methodology of all these studies is based on several researches, quantity and quality techniques, including reviews of the existing literatures, socioeconomic surveys, semi-structured interviews with Roma people, focus group discussions, etc.

The studies reviewed

Albanian studies found that satisfy the requirements of the paper are:

"An unknown case: Roma in Albania". Report of the European Centre for Roma Rights. Series "National Reports" nr. 5. July 1997; "Reproductive Health problems in Albania" (POSI, 2002); "Rapid Assessment and Response to HIV / AIDS among young women sex workers in the district of Vlora, Korça", (Unicef, POSI, 2002); "The Challenge of HIV / AIDS on vulnerable groups in Albania" (POSI, 2003); "Assessment of Child Trafficking situation of Roma and Gypsies in Albania, Tirana ODIHR, CPRSI (2003); "Solutions found in Albania for the company of children-victims of trafficking ", Terre des Homes. Pegi. (2004); "Assessment of the health services impact in Roma groups and the elderly in Tirana", (POSI & OSFA, 2004); Hermine De Soto, Sabine Beddies, Ilir Gedeshi "Roma and Egyptians in Albania: From Social Exclusion to Social Inclusion or The Gold Coin Dilemma", (2004); "Rapid Assessment and Response to HIV / AIDS in Albania: Young Roma and young MSM in Tirana, Vlora, Elbasan", (POSI & ASSA, 2005); " Biological and Behavioral Surveillance Study Report in Albania" (USAID, FHI, PHI & POSI, 2006); " Biological and Behavioral Surveillance Study Report in Albania" (GFTAM , PHI, POSI, 2008); "Demographic and Health Survey in Albania 2008-2009" (Institute of Statistics and Institute Public Health, 2010), "Improving Social Inclusion of Roma / Gypsy, (UNDP, 2010); "Study Report on the situation of Roma people who live and work in garbage dumpsite in Sharra", (FPGSH, 2010), "Mapping Roma Children in Albania" (Centre for Economic and Social Studies, 2011);

" Demographic and socio-economic status of Roma in Albania" (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Chances, UNICEF, 2012).

Studies limitations

1. Ethnic identity in some studies presents a limitation, because it is not based on the definition given for specific groups: Roma and Jevgj. Roma, are actually determined on the basis of self-reports in interviews and demographic questionnaires. Also, no differences were observed and there were no specific treatments related to ethnical mixtures between Roma and non-Roma.

There is no fact or analyses in selected studies, about the difference between Roma and Jevgj, so we are not sure about the real population involved in studies,

when it refers the Roma population.² So, believing by agreement, the studies have been considered with focus on demographic unit referred to ethnicity and not nationality.³

2. There is no study which figure out the professional roles, especially ones of the social worker. There is no evidence from the selected studies to confirm through interviews, focus groups, etc., that social workers or other health professionals have been or will be recommended to involve in long-term or permanent services for the social rehabilitation of Roma groups. Highlighting strengths, weakness, threatens and possibilities for changes, the social workers can facilitate the integration through a quickly penetration to the mentality and typical stigma that characterizes this population, to arouse their interest on integration as part of the Albanian society, mainly by affecting the attitudes and behaviors reflections that threaten individual health but not only.

The profession of social worker is the most valuable and adaptive in an enormous problems environment, especially those related to the health, resolution of which should be started from the minimum levels of rehabilitation, treatment, attitudes and behaviors, up to the official services organization.

3. Surveillances do not give us full data about HIV / AIDS' knowledge's.

There is no precise measurement or assessment on information functioning to prevent the risk behavior, which makes Roma people less interested to get information.

4. Mental health is not mentioned in the surveillance, although it has a big role in the sexual risk culture behavior.

5. In both two studies the biological and behavioral surveillance, sampling was done using standard sampling techniques in groups of household units.

The surveillance made in 2006 was held in the Roma population and the general ones, on the suburbs of Tirana, while the 2008-th ones, has a nationally representative population of Roma, but there is not the representatives of the general population.

6. All studies reviewed before 2012, are noted as exploratory, descriptive which simply report the situation, ascertain and that all give the similar theoretical suggestions about how to do what. There is no explanatory study, or recommendations based on social psychology or health and rights theories. No one theoretical basis to argue why it is important that language instruction, or the fact that if all the efforts so far have minimal results, what way can be better replaced with the desired expectations. The Roma language teaching is important in helping

² There is no specific detail about the question, but really the Roma population is differently identified from Jevgj. There are still many discussions for Albania, as a specific case connected with Roma issues. Note of the author.

³ Albanian Roma community is presented as Albanians. Author's note.

Roma children's cognitive development.⁴ This conclusion determined by L.S.Vygotsky in 1930, very important, based in his cultural theory, according to which the culture plays an important role in language and cognitive development of Roma children. This theory was not ever applied for Roma children, until early 2000, when many societies began to talk seriously about their education.

On the other side most of the studies made in the period 1960-1990, showed that for Roma children was more important to have good knowledge of official language of the country where they lived, than to learn the mother language. In countries like Romania, where the number of Roma population is very high, this theory was implemented and has given positive results.

In fact, no references are given for similar cases in Albania, where in accordance to the strategy is stressed Roma language teaching, despite of the difficulties that represents this process.

7. Almost all selected studies (but not only), publish that the poverty among Roma and Jevgj minorities in Albania, is the result of social exclusion and discrimination. It still remains unconfirmed theory until we should explain the relation of these causes with the culture of poverty, differences in identity between the two communities, as well as specifications for the Roma community, the more marginalized one.

Risk behaviors descriptive analysis of the studies

If from the explanations of qualitative studies results reported higher risk, the risk culture behavior management, continues to be low. If the studies made in 2003, reported low knowledge's about HIV / AIDS, recently is reported to have knowledge about ways of protective health behaviors by HIV / AIDS, STI risk. Often prejudice and stigma for Roma groups prevents the spread of information.

As noted in the study of POSI (2003), the starting time of sexual activity is earlier than the global average ones, which increases the level of vulnerability to infections, because the early sexual experiences are associated with lack of knowledge's, limited skills and insufficient social experiences. Risk behavior perception is particularly low in Roma men and women all together.

The analysis shows an unchanged situation on fact that the women report the start of sexual activity at age 15-17 years and males 12-14 years (RAR, 2005). The reported use of contraception during sex in the 2003-2005 studies, still problematic, was explained by the lack of basic protection information among Roma, the lack of information structures, fear by the side effects that protective means can cause(according to Roma peoples), and by the belief that partners have to each other

⁴ Hristo Kyuchukov, Constantine the Philosopher University, Nitra, Slovakia, online presentation: [http://www.romadecade.org/files//ftp/17%20ISC/Hristo%20Kyuchukov%20presentation%20\(Roma%20Identity%20session\).ppt](http://www.romadecade.org/files//ftp/17%20ISC/Hristo%20Kyuchukov%20presentation%20(Roma%20Identity%20session).ppt).

(fact without basic of veracity, indeed), (RAR, 2005). Roma women reported more loyal than men within their marriages.

To understand the situations it's more useful to be focused on cultural elements that bring decrease attention and awareness about the risk for these people. Roma injecting drug users can't be considered as sexual risk behavior group (POSI, 2003:12), although the average of having used drugs for the first time is about 15 years. The answer is: because of their low sexual activity.

Are we right to consider this fact as a dilemma or unclear situation: they begin earlier the sexuality, but they don't have so much sexual relationships; they begin earlier to use drugs, but they aren't at risk? Roma women have less risky behaviors than men related to the drug use (RAR, 2005: 46).

Massively is reported consumption of alcohol and tobacco among Roma groups. About 60% of them report the use of cannabis (RAR, 2005:49). They are extensively more soft drug users than serious and injections ones (VSHP, 2005: 49-50).

Roma women wanted to profit not only gynecological medical services, but also other services, on condition to be delivered by women doctors. There is no cases of HIV infection in these groups, sampled across the country in 2008 (BBSS, 2008), versus 0.3% of cases found in the previous surveillance, even by Roma people is reported that they have minimal knowledge's about this infection. They are inattentive about the care and protection measures to get prevent of the infection. Even in ordinary cases of health problems, they arrive at the last moment at health centers to receive services,

Surveillance of 2005, reporting 0% males and 2.6% Roma women tested for HIV / AIDS, 6.1% and 5.1% female's and males tested for hepatitis B, while there is no report on tests of hepatitis C. This indicate us the operation level of intervention programs regarding population testing.

General socioeconomic and education situation for roma

According to the latest publication of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and UNICEF (April, 2012), in "Study of the socio-economic demographics situation of the Roma in Albania", are registered in total 14 564 Roma inhabitants. This detailed database of each Albanian area, will facilitate now and in the future, the needs identification and the socio-economic policies decision-making process, related to them.

The map identify that the greatist number of Roma live in Tirana, 3 022 people, then is ranked Fier, with 2 311 persons followed by Korça, with 1324 and Elbasan, with 1 114 Roma inhabitants. Librazhd is the city that has only one Roma resident, followed by Kolonja with 7 Roma inhabitants.

In studies before 2012-th, we can notice infinitely findings regarding the causes of poverty and social exclusion for Roma communities, such as:

- ☞ the lack of proper culture of education at schools, focused of the un-institutionalized Romani language, Roma children discrimination ect.;
- ☞ the unemployment, focused on discrimination, casual, traditional occupations of Roma and their crisis in the market today;
- ☞ the problematic infrastructure, in relation to drinking water, sanitation, electricity, overcrowded and unsuitable houses for living;
- ☞ the social protection focused on the lack of benefits from the state because of prolonged unemployment and inability to seek assistance from the government;
- ☞ the limited access on information and governance, related to the lack of representation in decision making, illiteracy, lack of information about government policies. Not represented by any political party;
- ☞ the limited access to law and justice, lack of formalization of births and marriages;
- ☞ aid dependency because the lack of education, vocational training, unemployment, low income;
- ☞ Roma culture is threatened due to lack of official status as a minority and discrimination. Accurate statistics for their registration are lacking.

The Roma community is characterized by the diversity and this fact is important to give them different integration and rehabilitation access according the group (e.g. meckara, are more integrated than the others).

Roma is described as "a mosaic of different major groups"⁵ that shares the same history, culture and tradition. They all share the same origin as a people without geographically identified homeland, but with differences related to family structure, discrimination and social exclusion experiences by "the others", the majority non-Roma population.

A Roma family works also as an important economic unit. Roma children's socialization occurs through the links of this great family. Solidarity with the Roma culture begins since in the childhood. The education within the family for Roma, means learning the rules of Roma culture and tradition. Thus, Roma children receive this culture through grandparents, parents, the older sisters and brothers. Traditionally almost all government policies and international practices against exclusion and assimilation of education for Roma have resulted under the standard.

Expectations for equal opportunities for Roma education generally have been failed.

⁵ Liegeois, J. P. (1998) *School Provision for Ethnic Minorities: The Gypsy Paradigm*, University of Hertfordshire Press: Hertfordshire, pp 49.

The most repeated issues affecting education and health are noticed:

☞ The key reason that Roma children do not attend school or drop out of it, is extreme poverty of their families.

☞ Roma peoples, like many other segments of the population, have lost faith in schools as an institution with human values.

☞ Because of the stigma of poverty and rejection multifaceted education, Roma are less aware of the health and risk behaviors referred to the rest of the population.

According to recent studies (Centre for Economic and Social Studies, 2011) there is a decline of illiteracy for Roma population: from 52.4% in the period 1991-2000, to 34.4% in the period 2001-2010.

Following this study “Despite of an improvement in the educational level of the Roma during 2000-es, compared to the first decade of transition, illiteracy remains very high.[...]High unemployment and poverty, discrimination and social exclusion reflected in the lowering educational level. The Roma population is characterized by illiteracy (40.3 percent), completed (25.9 percent) and incomplete (14.9 percent) primary education, while very few have completed middle school education (16.1 percent) and secondary education (2.1 percent). In the meantime a comparison with the majority population shows that the gap is very large (40.3% Roma population and 1.6% the majority population). [...] In absence of education for the Roma population it is difficult for them to integrate into the labor market and their abilities compared to the majority population will continue to decrease. Roma parents list several reasons, which relate mainly to poverty. The difficulty to buy books and school items, lack of adequate clothing, poor living conditions and lack of infrastructure, the contribute children need to make in increasing family’s income, care for younger sisters and brothers, etc., are some of the main obstacles for the education of children. Apart from the above mentioned issues there are also institutional barriers, as well as barriers related to Roma traditions and culture. [...] Cultural barriers include gender roles, language and nomadic traditions. Besides these, some other obstacles are the low level of parental education and low perception of the education benefits. The survey shows that 69.4 percent of the Roma speak Romani and Albanian in their homes. But in some big Roma communities – such as those in Levan, Rrapishtë, Nish Tulla, Fushë Kruja, etc. – children use more the Romani language amongst them (18.3 percent). Consequently, many of them face difficulties on first grade where classes are in Albanian, pushing them to drop out of school. [...] In this case the policy should ensure the involvement of all Roma children in preschool education, where the Roma teachers would teach them proper Albanian. Almost 7 percent of Roma parents believe that the education of their children does not increase their opportunities to find employment in the formal market and improve their living conditions. As a result of extreme poverty conditions, many Roma families have a short term vision. Because of their low education level, many Roma parents cannot assist their children in doing their homework. Empirical data show that only 26.4 percent of Roma children aged from 3 to 6 years attend preschool facilities Children who attend preschool adapt

better to the school environment when they go to elementary school and face less difficulty in absorbing new knowledge.” Roma children easily and massively leave school which brings a very low level of education among them. On the other hand, the role of their big family unit, has been considered the most important tool in education. According to Marsel Kurtiade: "... A little expense once a year for school items is not so economically oppressive compared with costs of parties made by Roma families for circumcising..." Exclusion from health care services access and low living standards is believed to occur because of low life expectations level, high rates of infant mortality, low level of education and high rates of poverty.

As long as Roma people feel themselves different from "the others" and seeing that the path to change is very hard or almost impossible, much more they'll continue their stereotypes, rituals and crafts to survive and we'll find them still begging in the streets.

Profile of the Roma in general accompanied by begging, stealing and selling in the stock of old clothes and goods, while the attitudes and perspectives from the wider society for them, seem largely bad and negatives.

An important issue is that all services providers that met the needs of Roma groups, should know very well their history, culture and expectations, and should be characterized by a multicultural perception for understanding their needs and orienting them to fulfill these needs.⁶

Conclusions

There are big challenges for Roma groups in Albania: on the one hand the desire for integration, on the other hand the anchorage to begging (as the great challenge of all rehabilitation strategies, projects and policies), that enables the problematic empowerment of Roma and any kind of aid dependency, which promotes at last their passivity. Tradition obliges Roma to behave as isolated population, while the development finds them psychologically and morally unprepared to overcome the obstacles and prejudices for a worthy status and social position.

Urban growth stimulates and increases the stigma and prejudice from the majority to Roma, but also between Roma groups too connected with the possession of the "property market", that of employment, schooling tendency, etc.

(E.g. Interviewing Roma meçkarë, in Levan commune of Fier, in South of Albania (2005, 2010), were noticed that they don't believe sometimes that Roma karbuxhë can be stable workforce and massively will send children to school, because they perceive them at the lowest level of society civilization).

As an emergency we need psychological and sociological knowledge support, to explain human behavior theoretically, to understand in every intellectual level the causes for all unchanged behaviors and to decide how to manage the changes practices.

⁶ European Commission Report (2004).

The concept of “*the other*” is natural, as well as cultural among Roma community. Skin color has shown them that differ strongly from the others and so will be forever. Old clothes, language, their “not intelligent” and not acceptable habits by the majority, have created their stigma, so the majority has difficulties to see them as people who simply have a different identity and must be respected.

Also the attributive errors referred to Roma, have fatal consequences, because they directly affect rehabilitation activities led by the majority and directed to Roma community. Saying always “They are the same!”, “It’s just Roma thing” we increase the gap between the Roma minority and the majority population, in a few words, we prolong the isolation, although in our country the treatment of minorities has not known conflicts, these attributive attitudes reduce the integration speed of Roma in the whole life.

Forgiving and understanding are two different things. Understanding social distancing of Roma, it seems simple, but the facts always leave us at a crossroad, because the tendency which helps to explain the prejudice against the Roma life is poor.

When we talk about the education of Roma children, seem to measure the time whether or not Roma children are ready to attend public schools. This fact is an absurdity, which of course is based on the prejudices of the majority toward Roma people, but also on the Roma prejudice related to their never expressed intellectual abilities, due to illiteracy or partial education.

Theoretically and practically, the models derived from ethnic groups with difficult analysis of the culture origin, with the tepid economical, political and social cooperation, are difficulty accepted. In this case the degree of marginalization is quite large and the number of the problems for solution remains always great too. This affects the very low level of Roma community self efficiency.

Which part of the integration belongs to Roma children who since babies are faced with the rain, cold and the street? As I’ve mentioned out of this paper, in many discussions about Roma, it seems this way they’ve selected to be among the people (begging), in fact excludes them more. This “art of begging” nourishes the indifference and unwillingness to work among the majority of Roma community. The perspective of social capital capacity building, considered as a strong point of integration effects, is another challenge for Roma community.

This is directly related to the civilization level of the whole society.

Social capital resources of Roma community are dark and it brings “iceberg” obstacles to social, economic, cultural and political emancipation and development of these people.

I `d like to conclude this paper with the comment of Prof. Wiliam Chase, Pittsburgh University (2010), about the efforts we must do to understand the Roma “laziness” (thought that Roma people refuse to work): “... The most important and difficult too, is the need for all of us scholars, to learn how to get rid of, to learn

how to relate the limits with the validity. We all need to learn about the invisible barriers, as well as to learn how to get them out. So as a general plan we need to use visible and invisible barriers idea,, as a path,as a way to orient the Roma integration issues... ".

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