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NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US? ROMA PARTICIPATION IN POLICY MAKING AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

2, 2015

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Faced with Multiple 'Values' - From the Perspective of the Roma LGBTQ Community

DEZSÓ MÁTÉ

My paper is based on fifteen LGBTQ Roma persons' interviews.¹ I would like to express my gratitude to them for sharing their inner feelings and thoughts about being Roma and an LGBTQ person with me.

The inside-outsider intersection

In what I hope is a thought-provoking article I would like to offer an invigorating view, which is present in everyday life but deeply obscured by controversy, stereotyping and even prejudice.

In this paper I would like to address the issue of the Roma LGBTQ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer - community and discuss their identity and development stages from the stage of recognition (being multiply 'valued') until the stage of pride. First of all I would like to clarify briefly the meaning of multiple 'values', as used in my title.

The Roma LGBTQ community suffers from multiple discrimination from both the heteronormative majority society and from their own minorities (ethnic and sexual). They face xenophobia in their everyday life because they are Roma² and they struggle with homophobia because of being LGBTQ.³ These two categories lead them to daily actions which are used to hide and mask their real identity. The pressure to maintain this mask is tremendous. It is not enough to be a 'good' Roma, they must be extremely good Roma, outstanding with their study and with their work, they must be well-dressed and in good shape and of course must not show the 'typical Gypsy' stereotypical labels such as being dirty, a thief, vulgar and so on. The other sections of their mask are based on the heteronormative majority - to be a 'macho Gypsy bull' or 'the best traditional Roma housewife', and live what is perceived as a 'normal' life.

For example, from the heteronormative majority point of view the normal (Roma) person has an opposite-sex marriage, has their own children, and has a fixed workplace. From the point of view of the heteronormative minority (Roma) community it is (not obligatory, but) strongly recommended to have a wife who takes the 'traditional housewife position', who is always standing next to her husband and obeys him in every situation, brings up the children, cooks, and stays next to the fireplace. For a heteronormative Roma woman it is also extremely important to have a husband who can protect the family and who can demonstrate to other Roma families the conformity to heteronormative rules.

Roma LGBTQ discourse and representation has only just started to emerge on the scene. Although there is extensive academic literature as well as public discussion about the Roma and about LGBTQ people,⁴ the particular subgroup of LGBTQ Roma is often surrounded by a lack of awareness, taboo, and thus invisibility. If we look deeply and critically at the representations of Roma people we can easily reach some main conclusions. The definition of the identity of the social group is composed of pieces of external knowledge that often include elements which can be interpreted as unfavourable.

This paper will provide an overview of intersections of marginalised identities and will discuss the particular workings of oppression and identity-forming by Roma LGBTQ people.

Let us suppose the topic arises in a heteronormative conversation – the discussion has a high likelihood of

1 These results are based on the Hungarian Roma LGBTQ context; during my research I have not acquired data on the intersex individuals.

2 The European Roma Rights Centre, *The Impact of Legislation and Policies on School Segregation of Romani Children: A Study of Anti-Discrimination Law and Government Measures to Eliminate Segregation in Education in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia* (Budapest: 2007), available at: <http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/media/02/36/m00000236.pdf>.

3 Lucie Fremlova, Mara Georgescu, Gábor Hera, Laura-Greta Marin, Goran Miletic, *Barabaripen: Young Roma speak about multiple discrimination*, Youth Department of the Council of Europe (2014).

4 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1976) 53-73.

centring on a number of derogatory words and viewpoints. In the non-heteronormative discussion, the direction can be a bit different and does not necessarily reflect biased views; rather, LGBTQ Roma are framed in exoticised terms, which are often connected to sexuality and sexual desire. For instance, such images emerge such as ‘winnable prey’ at the ‘meat market’; common names are ‘fresh Gypsy meat’ or ‘wild meat’.

This can create an “exotic savage” phenomenon which can offer new (mysterious) desires from the Roma LGBTQ community to the non-Roma LGBTQ community.⁵

“...then he asked me if my chest is hairy or not ... what I like... It is really true that Roma guys’ blood is much more heated than the Hungarians’? ... (he told me) ... My dream was always to make love with one beautiful Roma person like you.”

(LGBT Roma man, 25 years old)

Different faces of oppression

If we describe the current situation of Roma LGBTQ it is important to take a look at Iris Marion Young’s framework, the Five Faces of Oppression.⁶ The Roma LGBTQ identity has to offer resistance to and deal with the challenges connected to issues of race, gender and class.

“Exploitation. Exploitation has to do with the difference between the wealth that workers create through their labor power and the actual wages that workers get paid. Exploitation is built into the market economy; bosses want to increase profits by lowering wages. The wage and wealth gap between the wealthy owners and managers, on the one hand, and the masses of working people, on the other, is an indication of the degree of exploitation that exists in a society.

Marginalization. This refers to being left out of the labor market. Those who are unable to get and keep steady employment – because of disabilities, education levels, age, historic

discrimination, lack of jobs in neighborhoods, the conditions of poverty, etc. – are experiencing marginalization.

Powerlessness. In this particular context, ‘powerlessness’ refers to the way in which workers are divided and segmented into jobs with autonomy and authority and jobs with little or no autonomy and authority. Workers in lower-status jobs experience more powerlessness (both on the job and in the sphere of politics) than workers with professional jobs. At the same time, giving some workers a little bit of autonomy on the job can undermine a sense of solidarity that they might otherwise feel towards all workers.

Cultural Dominance. This refers to the way that one group’s experiences, cultural expressions and history are defined as superior to all other groups’ experiences and histories. It is not necessary for anyone to say: “my group’s culture is superior;” it simply has to be treated as universal – representing the best in all of humanity. It is considered ‘normal,’ which means that all others are either ‘strange,’ or ‘invisible’ or both.

Violence. Our nation’s history is full of examples where violence has been used to keep a group ‘in its place.’ State-sanctioned violence has been used to enforce racial segregation, to keep workers from organizing and to break up strikes. Everyday violence also reminds social groups of what happens when they resist oppressive conditions: Black youths straying into a white neighborhood, gay men harassed and beaten outside of bars and clubs, women in the military being harassed and sometimes raped -- these are examples of the brutality of everyday life for so many of us. And the ways in which violent crimes are dealt with often reflects social and cultural biases; crime is ‘contained’ within neighborhoods that law enforcement has written off.⁷

Roma LGBTQ identity development - recognition and defence

In my opinion if we are working with LGBTQ Roma minorities we have to look carefully into the following factors which define the development of their identities. These social elements are the most frequently occurring and determining of

5 Judit Takács, *Queering Budapest*, in *Queer Cities, Queer Cultures: Europe since 1945*, ed. Jennifer V. Evans and Matt Cook (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

6 Five Faces of Oppression is taken from Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

7 This is taken from Sandra Hinson, quoting Iris Marion Young. See “Faces of Oppression”, available at: <http://www.strategicpractice.org/commentary/faces-oppression>.

the lives of marginalised people, who face them on a daily basis. Many earlier studies have tried to explain the wide variety of reasons and differences (deviation) between the mentioned minority and majority groups. Some rather prominent views try to argue that the Roma minority group's appreciable deviance is genetically coded into them, as with LGBTQ people's supposed sexual (deviation) orientation.⁸ Other⁹ researchers contend that the outcomes and differences between the minorities and majorities in identity development are affected by their socioeconomic status, language barriers, cultural differences, and special styles of learning, all of which determine their background and status.

"We virtually don't see ourselves in positive or neutral images. We always see ourselves reflected in negative images. This, I think, on the one hand, leads to self-hatred, and another result of it is that we don't have enough self-confidence. We never see ourselves reflected in a positive way, we only ever see these social documentary pictures at which I am personally very angry. This yields a lot more negative things than positive."

(LGBT Roma man - 29 years old)

The Roma LGBTQ person has multiple defences, because of sexual orientation and ethnic origin. We can divide their identity (pride) development into two lines, which are parallel with each other and which also show their defence processes.

In the first, the person meets with their ethnicity self-development barriers at an early age. The fact that they were born as a Roma defined and determined the person's life with a negative connotation. In their case, the first point at which they questioned their identity was when starting elementary school. The intensified pressure to 'prove' that they are good enough is present at every educational level from elementary school to university. The first time they met with a negatively-constructed difference was at the age of 6-7, when they entered the formal education system. The second line of the person's identity self-development and defence process was at the age of 14-15 when they started to hide their sexual orientation. However their first physical relations took place in their young adult years, at the age of 19 or 20.

Based on my interview experiences, usually the first same-sex desires in their life happened after a spatial change, after they moved to high school. The first option for defence could be the expectations of the Roma community, which are in some examples based on 'closed Roma tradition'. In these cases tradition expects a heterosexual relationship, because the community does not want to face exclusion and shame from other families. Secondly, the community forces their children to make their own 'normal family' which is, in their vision, a relationship between one male and one female. According to religious Roma families, homosexuality comes from the devil. If the person experiences same-sex desire, then *'their way is straight to hell'*. Such people are also characterised by independence achieved early in their life, and 'loneliness'.

"I told her that I like boys, I don't like girls."

- She asked me: What kind of Roma man you are? Roma men cannot be gay!

- I answered: I don't care about this Roma tradition gender stuff, you know... Actually I identify myself as a Chinese female. And what...?

- She answered: I think that you are not normal.

I answered: Okay, that is your opinion, I don't care, but I still like boys..."

(Conversation between one Roma 26-year-old Roma female and one 31-year-old Roma LGBTQ male)

"I have two brothers and one sister. I felt that I had to tell them that I am gay. First I told my sister that I am gay, and she answered: - 'You don't surprise me. I have known from the beginning.' After, I told my older brother. His reaction was: 'Now I have one other sister, or what?' - No sorry I am still male... and? Finally I told my youngest brother that I have a boyfriend. His answer was to punch me in the face. - 'If you don't give me 100,000 forints I will tell everybody that you are a (swear word) gay!'"

(LGBTQ Roma man, 30 years old).

"I recall the first day and the seating in the school... and that they wanted to seat me in the last row in the class. I did not understand why I could not sit in the first row. Only now I recognise that the seating was based on me being Roma. By the way, the other Roma student who was sitting next to me later on was transferred to a school for special needs children."

(LGBTQ Roma man, 23 years old).

8 Endre Czeizel "A balul sikerült szexuális orientáció", *Magyar Nemzet*, 22 August 1995.

9 See for example "Bayer's anti-Roma rant draws fire", *The Hungarian Media Monitor*, 17 January 2013, available at: <http://mediamonitor.ceu.hu/2013/01/bayers-anti-roma-rant-draws-fire/>.

The Identity-development stages

- shame/shock
- anger/denial
- proof
- reconciliation
- pride

The main differences between Roma identity and Roma LGBTQ identity are based on approaches to the level of the pride. The starting points for both communities are the same.

Both communities are faced with harm (false portrayals, harassment and discrimination) and try to ward off the negative impacts of this. This is an independent and defensive emotional mechanism in their personal development. After recognising their own vulnerability, the individual experiences wrath, anger and self-hatred.

Basically the first step on the pride development stage is the level of shame and shock. The person does not accept his or her identity, blaming himself/herself, and trying to refuse every outsider idea which could make self-identification stronger. At this level the feeling of shame is strong, and the person tries to turn in a ‘different direction’, towards the ‘white’, middle (or upper middle) class heteronormative ‘male’ perspective.

The second stage is the level of denial. Here the person repudiates and refuses every emotional LGBTQ desire which they experience. During this time the dominant feelings are disenchantment, anger and turmoil, which are often part of a defence mechanism, and are projected onto the wider surroundings. This stage, in the case of multiply-marginalised groups, is a turning point, as it can result in serious harm – injuring others or even self-harm (suicide, in the worst cases).¹⁰ This is one of the main turning points in individual identity-development, because the person starts their own self-expression. This is one of the ways how the hurt and vulnerability becomes public and visual. The process of expending energy on denying and minimising feelings has negative consequences for overall emotional health.

The third stage is bargaining. In this period the individual has stronger emotional strength, s/he feels that s/he is also

a valuable part of society. The individual wants approval from both their immediate as well as their wider environment. This stage is one characterised by overcompensation and striving to prove something in order to win approval from everyone, everywhere. Often they don’t notice that they have overachieved as they feel that they must constantly accomplish more than others due to their marginalised position and their desire to be accepted. The person thinks that the invested efforts are not enough for the majority society. Usually in this period Roma LGBTQ people can begin to aspire to a same-sex relationship for the first time.

The fourth stage in identity development is reconciliation and depression. Here the person starts to accept his or her sexuality and is ready to overcome the hurt, labelling and inhuman treatment that came his or her way. So it is important to have at this point an outsider who can listen and at the same time strengthen the individual. Support for and collaboration with the individual is extremely important, otherwise the person’s identity development can be broken. If they cannot receive this, then in the most extreme cases the person may be pushed over the edge and fall into despair; there are some who have resorted to violence or suicide.

The fifth and final stage is the level of pride. This is the level of self-acceptance. The person is proud of his/her achievements and what s/he has fought for. All the values which were hidden in their personality are expressed. All the things which were confused now become clear and bright in the individual’s mind. The person will critically question and take a stand against majority prejudices and homophobic and xenophobic discourse. Preconceptions about gender, sexuality and ethnicity will be re-evaluated. The Roma LGBTQ person will achieve a feeling of pride in relation to both ethnicity and sexual orientation.

Relationships and choice of partner

With regard to my interviewees, all of these people now have a serious same-sex relationship. Before they chose their LGBTQ partner almost everybody had a long-term relationship with a heterosexual partner. Basically from their point of view the expectations of informal (Roma) and formal (non-Roma) societies defined their earlier relationships. They had to follow

¹⁰ Judit Takács, Tamás Dombos–, György Mészáros and Tamás P.Tóth “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Bother: Homophobia and the Heteronorm in Hungary” in *Confronting Homophobia in Europe. Social and Legal Perspectives*, ed. L Trappolin, A Gasparini and R Wintemute (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2012), and available at: http://www.policy.hu/takacs/pdf-lib/dont_ask_dont_tell_dont_bother.pdf.

both cultural and ideological ideas regarding ‘normal’ life. One of the interesting results in their partner choice is that they usually do not have a Roma partner. (Only one person out of fifteen mentioned that he currently has a partner who is Roma as well). More interesting is the fact that they also exclude the majority Hungarians. They strongly asserted that they do not want either Roma or Hungarian partners.¹¹ The Roma LGBTQ individuals’ partners are (in twelve cases out of fifteen) foreigners who belong to the majority society.

“I am so confident in my relationship right now. My girlfriend is from abroad, so I feel that I am free. When I am in her family home I feel her parents’ love and respect. I think that they do not have any problem that their little girl has a Roma girlfriend. They totally accept me as a Roma person, maybe they have some questions about being LGBTQ.”
(LGBT Roma woman, 28 years old)

Conclusions

The process of categorisation and determination by other people can result in unbalanced self-definition for Roma LGBTQ persons. Some sources have argued that the inherent ‘deviance’ of these two minorities is genetically coded. Others believe that socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, and ‘lifestyle’ elements are what separate these groups from the majority. This presentation looks at the topic through the lens of multiple (or intersectional) discrimination and argues that Roma LGBTQ people are subject to particular

forms of oppression at the intersection of racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia.

My study provides a special overview, with Roma LGBTQ people describing their own identity development, and barriers and challenges. My aim is not to present a list of previous research which could interlink to Roma LGBTQ; rather I seek to show one possible perspective of the community. Of course this study cannot be a representative one, because my interviewees cannot represent the whole Roma LGBTQ community. I did not go deeper into the question of the community’s ethnic dispersion, because my aim was to raise the issue of the Roma LGBTQ community in the context of their broader situation.

In October 2014 LGBTQ issues formed part of a panel discussion at the *Nothing about us without us?* seminar and conference, on which this journal is based. In August 2015 the first ever Roma LGBTQ conference took place in Prague, bringing together academics, NGO representatives, and activists working in the field. The two-day event contributed to describing the experiences of Roma LGBTQ people. One month later the discussion continued at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre for Social Sciences Institute for Minority Studies with the event titled¹² *Faced with Multiple ‘Values’ - from the Perspective of the Roma LGBTQ Community*.¹³ Progress is clearly being made and in the process perhaps a more open and inclusive conception of Roma identity is being fashioned.

11 Interestingly German Sinti LGBTQ members prefer same-sex partners within their own Roma communities, in line with the preferences of the majority Roma Sinti community.

12 This event was co-sponsored by the Hungarian LGBT Alliance.

13 A recording of this conference is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KO91FQE7OhU>.

