

An Experimental Investigation Into the Nature of External “Roma” Categorization in Hungary

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Abstract

The paper presents results of an experimental investigation into the nature of “Roma” categorization. Using biological and social varieties of visual cues of persons as independent variables the perception of the persons in terms of “Roma essence” was measured. The aim of the experiment was to ascertain whether essentialism or constructionism determine the formation of the “Roma” judgment..

Keywords: Categorization; Experiment; Perception; Roma.

Introduction

There is an ongoing discussion in the literature on the nature of the categorization process that results in sorting out objects and persons into groups. In case of persons, the categorization process depends on the group membership of the perceiver. In-groups tend to be perceived in contrast with out-groups. The former are to be seen more heterogeneous, and the latter are to be seen more homogeneous (Hewstone, 1996). In both cases, however, the question can be raised whether the representation of the group involved has essence existing independent of the perceiver or the representation of the group is just a construction of the perceiver.

Theory-hypotheses

Essentialism is a belief in a substance that is permanent, unalterable and eternal. According to essentialism people tend to believe that human attributes are immutable and are related to innate factors. Essentialist judgments are particularly prone to interpret group categories with reference to innate factors.

Constructionism denies the prominence of inherent qualities in the formation of knowledge of social reality. According to constructionism, the world around us consists of social

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constructs lacking inherent qualities. Consequently, the perception of a social construct such as a group is contingent on the context rather on natural kind (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

The nature of the categorization process into “Roma” and “non-Roma”, on behalf of the non-Roma majority is far from being an issue of pure academic interest. Results of sociological studies demonstrate that the number of Roma minority group in Hungary is dependent on how the categorization has proceeded. Data on self-categorization show a less number of Roma than data resulting from categorization set by out-groups members (Csepeli & Simon, 2004). Consequently, from the perspective of the public policy dealing with the issue of Roma minority, it would be important to know how the non-Roma majority forms the judgment of being a Roma and what the essentialist and constructivist components of this judgment are.

Method

In order to test the role of essentialism and constructionism in the formation of the judgment of being “Gypsy”, we created four visual experimental conditions. In the first condition, a picture of a Gypsy teenage girl was shown. She was standing in front of a poor rural house. In the second condition, another picture was shown. In this picture, the same Gypsy girl was standing in front of an affluent rural house. In the third condition, a picture was shown again. In the picture, a non-Gypsy girl was to be seen standing in front of the poor rural house. In the fourth condition, a picture of the same non-Gypsy girl was shown standing in front of an affluent rural house.

The population of research consists of the students living in the eastern part of Hungary. Based on student online list, sampling was conducted in April, 2012. More than seven thousands (N= 7276) students from University of Debrecen took part in the experiment which was carried out by online means.

In order to test the differential perceptual effects of the exposure to the biological innate factor of body and the social construction of status, two dependent measures were used.

First dependent variable. Five emotional labels were offered. The subjects were asked to characterize the emotional state of the girls with the help of the labels. From the list of universal facial emotions described by Ekman, five labels were used such as happiness, sadness, anger, fear and surprise (Ekman, 2007).

Second dependent variable. Eleven categories were offered to the subjects, who were asked to rate on a five point scale, each of the categories as to the degree of certainty of the categorization of the girl in the picture. The list of categories was as follows: Poor, Rich, Rural, Urban, “Ungarndeutsch”, Transylvanian ethnic Hungarian, Roma, Slovak, Catholic, Reformed protestant.

Result

Table 1 shows that the experimental manipulation concerning the exposure to the Gypsy body was effective.² It didn't matter if the Gypsy girl in the picture was figuring in poor or rich environment; the subjects did not hesitate to categorize her as Roma. In the poor status condition, she was considered as Roma by 3.93 on a five point scale of certainty, and in the rich status condition, she was seen as Roma by 4.21 on a five point scale of certainty. Non Gypsy bodies were not seen as Gypsy in either experimental condition (1.87, 1.42).

² Based on Independent Samples T-test, the two group variables (1. Roma body/poor status vs. Roma body/ rich status; 2. Non Roma body/poor status vs. Non Roma body/ rich status) were not significant in the following cases: Catholic categorization & Group variable: Roma body/poor status vs. Roma body/ rich status; Independent samples T-test: Sig. (2-tailed): 0.052, T: -1.942, df: 1936, Mean Difference:-1.118. Reformed Protestant categorization & Group variable: Roma body/poor status vs. Roma body/ rich status; Independent Samples T- test: Sig. (2-tailed): 0.289, T: 1.061, df: 3397, Mean Difference: 1.503 Catholic categorization & Group variable: Non Roma body/poor status vs. Non Roma body/ rich status; Independent Samples T- test: Sig. (2-tailed): 0.552, T: -0.594, df: 1806, Mean Difference:-0.035. Reformed Protestant categorization & Group variable: Non Roma body/poor status vs. Non Roma body/ rich status; Independent samples T-test: Sig. (2-tailed): 0.174, T: -1.359, df: 1780, Mean Difference:-0.077.

Table 1: Certainty of categorization of the stimulus person as a function of the body and status (1-5 scale averages: 1: not at all typical; 5: totally typical)

| | Roma body- poor status | Roma body- rich status | non Roma body- poor status | non Roma body- rich status |
|------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Rich | 1.29 | 2.58 | 1.24 | 3.04 |
| Poor | 4.02 | 2.70 | 4.33 | 2.24 |
| Rural | 4.17 | 3.64 | 4.24 | 3.14 |
| Urban | 1.67 | 2.19 | 1.61 | 2.74 |
| "Ungardeutsch" | 1.30 | 1.21 | 1.45 | 1.55 |
| Ethnic Hungarian | 2.01 | 1.89 | 3.24 | 3.63 |
| Transylvanian | 2.15 | 1.73 | 3.16 | 2.23 |
| Roma | 3.93 | 4.21 | 1.87 | 1.42 |
| Slovak | 1.62 | 1.42 | 1.85 | 1.67 |
| Catholic | 2.21 | 2.33 | 2.38 | 2.41 |
| Reformed Protestant | 1.97 | 1.92 | 2.25 | 2.32 |

On the basis of the data demonstrated on Table 1 two conclusions can be drawn.

1. Regardless of status, the picture of the Gypsy girl elicits Roma categorization among the experimental subjects by far more certainty than the picture of the non-Roma girl.
2. In the case in which the Gypsy girl is perceived in rich environment the tendency to categorize her as Roma is more pronounced than in the case she has been in the poor environment.

Other categorization effects of the rich and poor environment

Richness and poverty

Regardless of the nature of the body, respondents were ready to categorize as rich the girls who have been put in rich environment and they were certain, by high degree, of the poverty of those girls who have been put in a poor environment.

Being rural and urban

The same tendency was to be observed in the case of the rural and urban categorization. It doesn't matter if they are Gypsy or non-Gypsy the girls in poor environment were seen more as rural and less urban, while the girls figuring in rich environment were seen less rural and more urban.

Ethnic and national categorization

Regardless of socio-economic status, compared to the Gypsy girl in all cases of national or ethnic minority categorization (Hungarian, Ungarndeutsch, Transylvanian, Slovak), the non-

Gypsy girl was seen by higher degree of certainty to belong to these categories. It seems that the perception of Roma identity reduces the likelihood of alternative national and ethnic categorization.

Religious categorization

The perception of Roma identity does not affect the certainty of Catholic identification. The Gypsy girl, however, was seen by less certainty as Protestant. Social status did not influence the certainty of religious categorization in either religion.

The perception of emotional stats and the attributed Roma identity

Table 2 demonstrates that once the girl in the picture has been perceived as poor Roma, she is seen happier than her rich counterpart. In case of the non-Roma conditions, the tendency is reversed. The poor non-Roma girl has been seen less happy, than her rich counterpart. The Gypsy girl in rich environment was seen sadder than as her counterpart in poor environment. This tendency is reversed again in the other two experimental conditions, where the non-Gypsy poor girl was seen sadder in contrast with the non-Gypsy rich girl.³

Table 2: *Perceived emotional state as a function of Roma categorization and status (1-5 scale averages: 1: not at all typical; 5: totally typical)*

| | Roma body- poor status | Roma body- rich status | non Roma body- poor status | non Roma body- rich status |
|-----------|------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Happiness | 1.80 | 1.37 | 1.54 | 2.18 |
| Sadness | 3.58 | 3.71 | 3.77 | 2.76 |
| Anger | 2.12 | 2.53 | 2.08 | 1.99 |
| Fear | 2.70 | 2.66 | 2.85 | 2.19 |
| Surprise | 1.79 | 1.56 | 1.69 | 2.11 |

The attribution of anger seems to depend on the socio-economic status of the Gypsy girl, who in the rich condition was perceived angrier than in the poor condition. (In the non-Roma conditions there wasn't a bigger difference between the perceived anger of the poor and rich girls).

The variables of fear and surprise have not shown much difference across the four experimental conditions.

Conclusions

The experiment comparing the categorization and emotion perception effects of exposure to the pictures of a girl in the conditions of presence and absence of Gypsy body in poor and rich environment has shown that the categorization of being Gypsy is essential in the sense that it cannot ignore the biological characteristics that differentiate the body from those bodies that are dissimilar. The results of the attributions of emotional states, however, have demonstrated the power of the constructionist aspect of the Roma identification. Being rich is certainly against the dominating stereotype of the Roma in contemporary Hungary which is stressing

³ Based on Independent Samples T-test, the two group variables (1. Roma body/poor status vs. Roma body/ rich status; 2. Non Roma body/poor status vs. Non Roma body/ rich status) was not significant in the following case: Fear emotional state & Group variable: Non Roma body/poor status vs. Non Roma body/ rich status; Independent samples T-test: Sig. (2-tailed): 0.344, T: 0.946, df: 3475, Mean Difference: 0.040.

poverty. Consequently, the exposure of the girl not fitting in the frame of the dominant stereotype caused dissonance among the experimental subjects which was lowered by reducing the degree of her happiness and enhancing the degree of her sadness.

Table 1 and 2 show that the role of social status signals tends to be smaller in the Roma-frame across almost all emotional states and socio-demographic characteristics. One should note that in the typical case, mean values of the response variable in the two Roma conditions are positioned between the mean values in the two non-Roma conditions. Summary of a simple argument which draws on the classical theories of stereotypes:

It is difficult to observe various aspects of personality and social status directly. Stereotypes on social groups are to bridge the information gap. Even some small pieces of information about photograph can be used as cues for psychological and social status.

Ethnic/racial color is a crucial signal, which can easily be observed, and is used by many laymen as a proxy for personality and status. Thus, when such a signal is present, the observer uses his/her ethnic stereotypes.

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