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About the self-concept of the Gipsy community

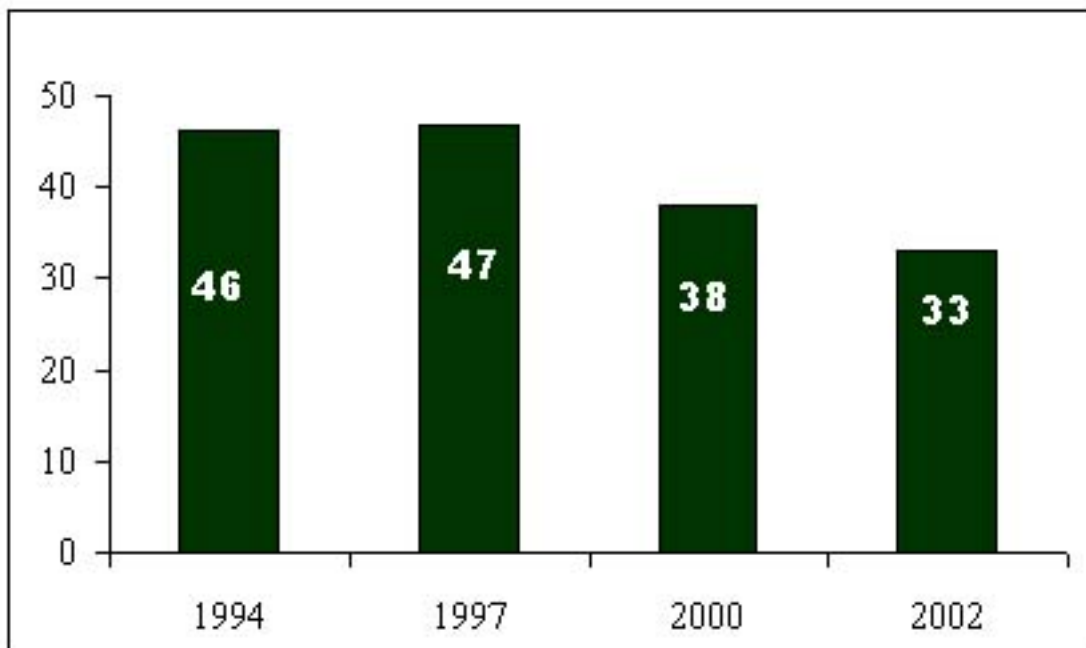
According to several research, the open, discriminative attitude to Gipsies has decreased compared to the middle of the 90s in Hungary, xenophobia and anti-Semitism have not changed, however, the anti-Gipsy attitude has increased to the greatest extent in the perception of the population.

The pressure to face problems caused to them is getting stronger, however, constantly heavy is the need that the majority should consider Roma as a distant, homogenous group, and not as natural members of the republic, who are such and such people. Although this is not always shown in research, the majority of the Roma would rather accept it.

„Gipsies should totally be separated from the other parts of society because they are unable for symbiosis.” –Percentage distribution of agreement in the adult population



An example for the decrease of the open anti-Gipsy attitude – the change in the attitude related to segregation, 1994-2002



“We can only approve that there are still some pleasure-grounds, where Gipsies are not allowed to enter.” -Percentage distribution of agreement in the adult population

(Data source: 1994: Hungarian Academy of Sciences-MTA- Institute for Psychology: Research in Authoritarianism and prejudice, 1997: Hungarian Household 6th stage of “Panel”-program. 2000: TÁRKI Omnibusz 2000/12. 2002: HAS-MTA- Institute for Psychology-TÁRKI. 2002. May. Public Opinion Research)

In our opinion the decrease of the open discriminative prejudices against Gipsies is a result of the prevailing tolerance to the Roma in public communication. Whereas earlier it was widely accepted to articulate open rejection against Roma, nowadays the prejudice against them appears obliquely and coded in the public or limited-publicity communications. This, though, does not prevent the uncovered appearance of anti-Gipsy attitude in social, neighbourhood and other situations.

In addition, it can be observed that the attitudes toward Gipsies have remained basically negative, and among other ethnic minorities the rejection of the Roma is very likely.

The social distance – in the case of neighbourhood, work and relatives- is still strongly kept by the non-Roma population. The rate of rejection in workplace-relationship is 29%, that of living next door to each other is 40% and that of having Gipsy relatives is 58%. Among the examined groups (Arab, Gipsy, Chinese, Hungarians in Rumania, Jewish) the social distance was the greatest in the case of the Roma.

Regarding public opinion, anti-Gipsy tendencies are much more likely than xenophobia or anti-Semitism. Nearly 4/5 of the adult Hungarian population perceives this tendency either

unchanged (39%), or increasing (38%). The perception of the public opinion contradicts to the observed changes in the attitudes.

Significant difference is shown regarding qualification: i.e. between those with lower qualification than high-school degree and those with higher than it. Anti-Gipsy tendency appears to be the lowest among people with a college or university degree, whereas it is the highest among those with a vocational school qualification. Similar is the case regarding personal income: the 2/5 (the lower two 1/5s) of people tends to articulate such tendencies and prejudices.

Typical emblems

Content-analyses of the media show that thematically the media-image (created by the majority) overlaps with stereotypes of the Hungarian Roma. In this image a threefold attention is paid to them; in the domain of poverty, culture and conflicts.

Poverty. – Poverty and unemployment is the everyday reality of most Roma families. This domain was highlighted by the different aids adjudged by the majority (mainly by the state and local governments).

Gipsy culture: - The overwhelming majority of news articles were fairly uninteresting small ones about cultural events like exhibitions, dance groups, concerts, whereas a small number of articles dealt with artist portraits.

Crimes. There are a few such definitely prejudiced media-images of the Roma, like mentioning them in crime reports till 1997 on a regular basis- in case of other minorities the ethnic belonging of the criminal has not been mentioned for nearly sixty years. Mentioning one's ethnic belonging publicly was considered against the law together by the Ombudsman of Data Protection and that of Minorities in 1997. Nowadays the ethnic belonging of Roma suspects and accused are mentioned only once in a while in the Hungarian press.

Gipsy children about their communities

It is usually the dominant society who is asked about the stereotypes of the Gipsy/Roma community, whereas we hardly know anything about how the members of the community regard themselves, how they perceive themselves as a “we-group”, against which the surrounding society is dismissive. But why do Roma people hold to their communities? Just because they were born into those, and they are bound together by their family relations? Or because of the refusal of the majority? Has such a “we-as-a-group” phenomenon got a positive content, or is just the result of segregation? We asked children how they perceive the Gipsy community.

We had learners of Gipsy Culture of primary schools write a composition in the summer of 2007. Altogether 240 pupils from 34 different schools of the country participated in our research, out of whom 145 were 11-12 years old, and 126 were between 13 and 15. The sample is not representative and not fully random; pupils participated in the research, who studied Gipsy Culture, and schools, which were interested in the research and its results, what they could integrate in their education program. In Hungarian: Iskolakultúra, 2004.

The question aimed at bringing positive attitudes to the surface: “Why do I like Gipsies?” This was supported by the comment that “I myself belong to this community, is only one of the reasons”. It is scientifically dubious, whether to love or not to love a particular community is fair or unfair. On one hand, we estimated the question realistic regarding everyday narratives, on the other hand, our goal was to move emotions and to call up stereotypes with positive content.

The self-concept of the community

Self-characterizations are usually articulated as a counter-reaction to the “Hungarians”, sometimes “Gadjo”-s (Romani word, meaning stranger, referring to Hungarians) or peasants (also used by the Roma to refer to Hungarians)^[1], or in opposition to the widespread negative image of them: “we” are better than they are, or “we” aren’t such and such people like as they think. Even if this opposition does not appear word-by-word, it is hidden –latently- in the formulations. It could be said that the members of the community have an outsider view on themselves, however, it rather refers to being on a permanent standby, which is basically the need for opposition to the hostile outside world. We can hardly over-estimate the presence of this tension in the everyday behaviour of children (and adults). This tension means a kind of force. Moreover, not only the individual’s worth is to be proved, but that the whole community, in which every individual is equally important, is not inferior to other communities. The opposition, though, does not necessarily mean an **enemy-image**, it lacks aggression and hatred. It is typically the self-protection and defence against prejudices.

Two important factors should be highlighted before going into deeper analysis: one of them is the importance of **talking** (“we speak about it”, “we have fun”, they tell stories in groups, “they speak loudly on the streets”, etc.) The other is the frequent mentioning of **respect**, which can also be perceived as cultural characteristics. The fundamental importance of respect (in the Romani language “patyív”) can be found in every single ethnographic work about the Roma. In Hungarian, non-Roma, narratives the word “respect” has a pathetic tone, it is rather used as rhetoric device to express events of higher importance. Here, respect towards other people –towards children included- is one of the most important attributes of the community.

As negative characteristics loudness, affray and “carousing people” are mentioned. The older participants -14-15 years old- mentioned more negative attributes; quarrels and affray are rather recurring, and we can find the absolutely negative image of the Roma here.

Attributes assigned to the Roma

Positive attributes

Emotional characteristics

Friendly, kindly
family-oriented
rich in emotions
child-oriented
funny
cheerful

Moral characteristics

work hard
strong power of will
rightful
trustable
cannot be duped
honest
cohesive
ordinary
helpful
obey rules
diligent
clean
have respect to others

Intellectual characteristics

talented
teachable
adaptive

Negative attributes

“carousing people”
ready to fight
talk loudly on the street
“chooses the oblique ways”
quarrel a lot
shirker (men)
hoocher (men)
greedy, they want everything for themselves
superstitious

Social relations

Emotional characteristics are most likely to occur stressed in each composition. The attribute “**friendly**” is often directly articulated in contrast to Hungarians.

“It’s good to talk to them, and they are friendlier than Hungarians. You cannot talk to Hungarians, but you can with Gipsy, and Hungarians are not friendly.” (girl, Pécs)

“Because they are kind! If we visit a Gipsy family, there you find tidiness, and as I said, they are kind. They are funny, everyone is nice, friendly, and if you say something others don’t like, they laugh at it. So they are not aggrieved at all.” (boy, Gyula)

Family-orientedness, appreciation and respect for children and the elderly are significant attributes, and are acknowledged and granted by the majority of the society. We could think that in the case of Roma, an 11-12 years old child does need the family, and does not rise against the parents in the pre-pubertant age. However, it is not that simple; related to the above-mentioned concepts, the mother and father, siblings and the grandparents are never mentioned. There are relatives and the “family” –elderly and children strongly included-: the community.

“They respect children, elderly and every good-hearted people, who like them.” (girl, Debrecen)

“I like Gipsies because they respect the elderly. And if one of them dies, they keep vigil 3 nights and 3 days. They love their children.” (boy, Pécs)

“This is what I like for Gipsies, that we are more honest than the Gadjo-s, if we are happy or sad, we don’t keep it inside, but we share it with the others. I think we have a stronger sense of belonging together than Hungarians, and we respect the elderly more. It is not usual for Gipsies to send the elderly to a twilight home, but to take care of them. (boy, Nagyrábé)

Work

A specific dimension of identity –the image of the “we-group”- is shown by the moral attributes listed here, that draw the picture of the community as real civil beings: **hard-working, strong power of will, trustable, honest, and holding to rules**. The Gipsy community –from an inner view- has Max-Weberian features, which could be prescribed for all civil as norms?

Having seen and participated in the life of Roma families, struggling for an everyday living, the image seems to be true of a diligent Roma, having the worst jobs refused by everybody, who cannot be duped and obey the rules.

“I like Gipsies because they won’t give up hope and they dare to tell you everything they feel. I like it much that if they want something, they do everything possible to get it. The problem is that many people have prejudices just because of the skin colour. They have a strong power of will, which helps them truly in troubles and success.” (girl, Takatkenéz)

“They take in everyone in their home. They fight for their country. They don’t envy each other’s things. They obey the rules.” (girl, Pécs)

“They do useful jobs, and they like working very much.” (boy, Karcag)

“Gipsies like working, plucking goose-feather, listening to music and dancing.” (girl, Tiszacsege)

In the writings of higher-grade pupils, **work and the importance of work** play a crucial role. Its function is to earn the everyday living and to supply children. The child –according to the model in the secondary literature, for instance **Stewart: 1994 or Forray-Hegedűs: 2003-** perceives an important difference between women and men.

“And I would like to write about women’s everyday work to get everything needed, about their activities. They always have an idea how to get it right to earn a living. (boy, Gyulaj)

In contrast to the image of the ordinary, hard-working Gipsy family, having no work is also present.

“There are families, where the man does not work, and he sends his wife to work. And what is earned by the wife, it is taken away and spent to the last penny by the men for drinking and gambling, and the children do not have anything to eat.” (girl, Nyírkáta)

Work does not appear in the children’s writings as a civic occupation; it is rather a hard, tiring activity of breadwinning. The description below makes one feel that the particular people – rather men, but there are some women as well- is the girl’s own family, who do not make an effort to supply themselves and their children. The only one excuse is that it is difficult for men to get into a community, which is not “their race” – non-Roma-.

“I would shoot a film on Gipsy unemployment. Women are sitting at home and they do the house work. They visit their neighbours all the time, gossip with them and forget about the house work. Men always make business or they idle and don’t care about what the children will eat. It doesn’t matter if there’s work available. However, it is true that it’s difficult for them to get into a community, which is not their race. They like taverns, there they feel free. They like playing music, dancing and drinking in the evening. They very much like having feasts among relatives. (girl, Nyíregyháza)

Among intellectual characteristics the most frequently mentioned are music, dancing, tales and literature –about this later in other connection-. The ability to accommodate is connected to the history of the Gipsies.

Negative attributes are rare. This might be due to the conscious opposition to the prejudices against the minority environment. The attribute “speak loudly on the streets” is written in a context, where the writer accuses the majority to be impatient, and they create a great problematic out of this little phenomenon. To interpret “they always choose the oblique ways” is much more difficult: the writer might have intended to mean that the Roma have a worse life, they have to work more to achieve their goals than others. This is, of course, not necessarily negative, this interpretation is rather suggested by the context.

„My kind...”

The aspect of belonging to a community, as the evident result of love, will be analysed separately. To the disputed question “Who is a Gipsy?” in the recent secondary literature (cf. **Ladányi-Szelényi, 1997; Havas-Kemény-Kertesi, 1998**) children give a straightforward answer. Each of them relates to their ethnic belonging: only 4 of them avow themselves non-Roma. Some of them felt necessary to claim that they are “half-Gipsy”, or even “mongrel”. The latter has a definitely negative connotation in the Hungarian language, but in these compositions it is only a simple claim, and the negative connotation does not have impact on the writer either, i.e. we do not recognize being forced to prove in it.

The self-definition “Roma” hardly appears in the compositions –in case the child considers itself Walach- just like some apply the word “Beas” to relate to their community. The word “Gipsy” is to be found in every single writings, as a synonym of Roma or Beas as well. This shows that children accepted the expression of “Gipsy”- however the word “community” was often substituted by different expressions:

“my kind”;
“my nation”
“my people”
or simply “Gipsies”

Most typical is (but not common) “my kind”. This is surprising because –although in a scientific context the expression is relevant for relating to the Gipsy/Roma community- it is not commonly used in the vernacular. This expression is perceived by the Gipsy children as the basis for their emotional affection, which highlights the importance of consanguinity. It is not the core family to which it related but an extended population, relatives, the big family – whatever these expressions mean. It seems that accepting the label “Gipsy” extends consanguinity outside the sub-group, because both Beas and Roma defines themselves as Gipsy-

“I like my kind because we can play music well. And because we hold strongly together, because they take care of me.” (boy, Nyíregyháza)

“I like Gipsies because I also belong to them. And every person likes its own people.” (boy, Debrecen)

“The Gipsy nation is a very nice nation to me. Not because I am also Gipsy, but because I appreciate them.” (lány, Taktakenéz)

“I think every person should know and be proud of their origins. In the first place I like Gipsies because I am also Roma, Walach, and I speak Lovári (dialect of Romani)” (boy, Nagyrábé)

“I am a Gipsy boy! I like my people much and I respect them.” (boy, Tiszacsege)

“I am a Gipsy boy and I like my kind very much.” (boy, Tiszacsege)

“I like being among Gipsies, because they are my folk and kind.” (girl, Tiszacsege)

“My mom as her family is Gipsy but my father is Hungarian. It follows that I belong to both races, I am mongrel, but I feel myself Gipsy.” (girl, Tiszacsege)

The following longer bit is highlighted not only for illustration of the above-mentioned but because with a good and strict logic of a child it spans from the personal, via group-level to the political nation, to the “grand-Politics”.

“I like Gipsies because they are my kind, and if they were only Hungarians, it wouldn't be so good. And the population of Hungary wouldn't reach 10 millions. And if Gipsies didn't exist, there would not be Hungary either. My mom is a Beas too, and if she weren't here, I would not have come to this life.” (girl, Pécs)

In the citations so far we often find expressions applied to the “other”, non-Roma community. We did not offer a definition for that in the formulation of the question, so children were using expressions common in their particular community. It is probable that besides using their own words they tried to formulate politely as well. This expression is “**Hungarian**”. As we can see in the last citation, Gipsies, Beas and Roma are at the same time members of Hungary's population, so in this sense they are Hungarian. However, they define themselves Gipsy, Roma or Beas actually in opposition to the “Hungarians”. We can also find “other people”, “Gadjo-s” and rarely “peasant” but it is very unlikely to be used –especially the latter- outside their community. Is the obvious result of the exceptional situation (research) and the non-Roma environment, i.e. their written language is different from the oral usage of it. It is still more relevant in this case, because they were trying to use expressions that are not violating for their teachers and the majority population.

In some of the compositions we find reference to discrimination against the Roma –especially in the case of work-.

“I would also ask from him, whether he could get a job. I would ask it because there are some companies and entrepreneurs, who won't employ Gipsies because of their skin colour, even if they have an appropriate qualification.” (boy, Pécs)

The confession of belonging to the group –as a result of emotional affection- is often followed by supportive positive contents. Such expressions are **pride** (I am proud of being Gipsy”) and “I am not ashamed of being Gipsy”), the latter having a bit lower emotional content. We can also list formulations like “**It's good to be Gipsy**”. More neutral are the will of “destiny” or of “God” as basis for their idea of their Roma being, which they accept easily.

In the following passage written by a girl we find a moving and poetic expression as a complex social and consanguinity approach to identity.

“I like Gipsies because they are just like me, and their skin colour is identical with mine. Their behaviour and cry, their laugh and happiness are also just like mine. I have great respect for Gipsies because I like them.” (girl, Gyulaj)

Culture and traditions

Besides belonging to the group by consanguinity, a wide spectrum of cultural values and traditions is to be mentioned, which are the basis for emotions and social relationships.

Language and language use is an important one amongst these. One of the non-Roma pupils likes Gypsies because they “speak an interesting language”. Affection for language can be found among children whose native language is either Beas or Romani.

“I love my relatives. And I like much if they speak the Gipsy language.” (girl, Pécs)

“I would like to get a closer view of the beauty of their language because a nation is dead without its language.” (boy, Békés)

‘I like Gypsies because I am also one of them. It’s true that I also have Hungarian friends, but I am never ashamed of being Gipsy among them, and I learned their language and culture. And I am getting to know the tradition and language of the Gypsies.’ (boy, Tiszacsege)

Language can also be the basis for trans-border relations of brotherhood and consanguinity.

“It’s good to be a Gipsy also because we can make ourselves understood in other European countries. As if we were brothers to the Gypsies of other countries. “ (girl, Nagyrábé) ,,

Language use is part of cultural traditions;

“I like it most, when in case there is feast they come together and the extended family celebrates according to old forms of traditions. I like it when at such occasions they ask for permission to speak, and they use old forms of language as well. (boy, Nyíregyháza)

Preserving and living with traditions is very valuable for the community and the cohesion inside it. This is already realized by an 11-12 year old child, and they are proud of their traditions and of the fact that their family has preserved and practices these. Non-Roma also appreciate and sometimes envy the Gypsies’ traditions. The cohesion of the “wider big family” is represented and strengthened by vigils, Christenings, wedding feasts and basically all forms of celebrations (“mulatságo”- as M. Stewart in his study of 1994 refers to). Being together offers a great opportunity to play music, sing, dance, tell jokes and telling and listening to tales and stories. Dues to this, each longer composition contains the importance of traditional togetherness, when they children are explaining their affection for the community, which they also want to show to the outside world.

Different **occupations, attainments** and types of **knowledges** are listed among traditions, which have been acquired by the members of the community: listed are herbs and the knowledge of cure (according to one of the children, women in their community know 200

different herbs), they highlight the attachment for animals, especially for the horse: “no one can speak the horses’ language like Roma can.”– writes one of the children.

Religion also belongs to the traditions the Roma are proud of. “They love God and pray to Him. They even go to holy places to Virgin Mary”-writes one of them.

Delious food, **the kitchen of the home** strongly belongs to the parental home. For Gipsy pupils it is often the source of their pride of belonging and their identity. Eating together is an important accessory of celebrations (Csemer-Korpádi-Patyí, 2003 also reflects this tendency). Whether it is scientifically reliable that there is a special Gipsy gastronomy, children and adults agree that Gipsies have a good sense for cooking – Gipsies, Beas and Roma alike.

Whatever the occasion for celebrations is, eating, being together, talking, music, dancing and **cheerfulness** is important for Gipsies. Prank and jokes are typical for such occasions of the Roma, so everyone tries to get into the centre of the group by being comic. This social style is based on a particular social pressure (like that of “keep smiling”) and makes outsiders and children of the particular community feel that “Gipsies” are always happy.

„That is in the song...”

The importance of **music** and **songs** – as **Kovalcsik** (1996, 2000) aptly describes- is typical for each and every composition, irrespectively of the writer’s subgroup belonging. Music is one of the most important pieces of emotional affection in the group, and the basis of the pride of confessing one’s ethnic belonging.

Some of the pupils mention music, dancing and singing together as a memorable part of celebrations. Other list celebrities, they can be proud of, and whom they would introduce to the whole country, to whole Europe. Some have a long list of celebrities starting with Budapest Gypsy Symphony Orchestra, via Bódi Guszti to Kalyi Jag and Ando Drom. There are some who are proud of their family as a group of musicians. (“Uzse ile”)

“When I hear the music in TV or on the radio, I really feel proud of being Gipsy. It simply moves me, what a Gadjo can hardly understand.” (boy, Nagyrábé)

“I understood the fire of my heart and the stronger and stronger emotions when I hear the music, and if any Gipsy is offended.” (girl, Békés)

“I am a Gipsy by birth and I like being among them very much. My graddad often tells us how it used to be, the traditions, and at feasts we are together, sing together and dance, and we go house by house to meet and greet our relatives and brothers.” (boy, Debrecen)

Almost similarly important- however not to be shown to the outside world with pride” is dancing. “We dance Gipsy dances.”- writes one of the pupils. “We sing, dance, tell stories and have fun.”- important activities of the occasions when they are together; the practical, authentic and felific events of belonging together.

We hardly find roots of the intention to assimilate (and leave nothing behind) in the case of children. On the contrary, a strong, true and deep commitment and emotional affection to the community is to be found in the often childish formulations. To illustrate this, here is the confession of a boy:

‘I like being Gipsy because I often do things Hungarians don’t do.’

“I like being Gipsy because I dance a lot.”

“I like being Gipsy because I like singing.”

“I like being Gipsy because I do what I want to.”

“I like being Gipsy because they are happy.”

“And I add that I like Gipsies.”