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Christine Walsh, Brigitte Krieg

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Roma Identity: Contrasting Constructions

Abstract

The increasing settlement in Hamilton, Ontario of large numbers of Roma families from seeking refugee status has challenged local service providers in the health, social services, education, immigration, and justice sectors. The overall aim of the Roma Project was to promote deeper understanding of Roma peoples and their culture in order to inform more effective and culturally appropriate service delivery. Focus group and key informant interviews were used to gather information about the perceived needs of the Roma community from the perspective of community members and service providers from diverse sectors. The needs assessment process highlighted the contextualization of Roma identity as shaped by historical, social, cultural, and situational factors. The development of a contextually-rich identity yields more precise information, provides insight into experiences of marginalization and oppression, and challenges existing stereotypes and biases. This knowledge is critical to inform the development of policies and programs to better meet the needs of those most disadvantaged by social inequities.

Résumé

La hausse de l'implantation à Hamilton en Ontario d'un grand nombre de familles rom originaires de Hongrie et demandant le statut de réfugiés a posé une gageure aux servives locaux dans les domaines de la santé, des services sociaux, de l'éducation, de l'immigration et de la justice. Le Projet Rom visait en général à promouvoir une meilleure compréhension des peuples rom et de leur culture afin d'informer les intervenants des divers services d'une manière plus efficace et culturellement adaptée. Des entrevues avec un groupe de base et des informateurs clefs ont servi à se renseigner sur les besoins de la communauté rom, tels que perçus par leurs membres et par les fournisseurs de service des divers secteurs. Le processus d'évaluation de ces besoins a mis en lumière la contextualisation de l'identité rom telle qu'elle a été formée par des facteurs historiques, sociaux, culturels et conjoncturels. Une identité contextuellement riche offre une information plus précise, permet de mieux comprendre les expériences de marginalisation et d'oppression et met en question les stéréotypes et préjugés existants. Ce savoir est critique pour servir le développement de politiques et de programmes qui aillent mieux au devant des besoins de ceux qui sont le plus désavantagés par les inéquités sociales.



We have been erroneously defined by outsiders
—now we must correctly define ourselves.

Ronald Lee
Roma Community Centre, Toronto

Since 1999, there has been increasing settlement in Hamilton of large numbers of Roma families from Hungary, seeking refugee status. Local agencies were concerned about the Roma population's perceived difficulties with the child-protection and youth and criminal justice systems and the ability of these systems to provide effective services to the Roma community. For example, more than 300 Roma families had been referred to the Catholic Children's Aid Society (CCAS) of Hamilton-Wentworth for child-protection reasons. Funding for the Roma Project was secured through the Community Mobilization Programme, Crime Prevention Reduction Strategy. The overall aim of the Roma Project was to assess the needs of the Roma community from their own perspective and from the viewpoint of the community agencies providing services to them. The goals of the research project were to identify individuals who might be able to speak for the Roma community or who might be developed as leaders of the Roma community, and to identify agencies which are mandated to provide services to meet the diverse needs of the Roma community. With the assistance of those with a vested interest in serving the Roma community, the project intended to identify more effective approaches or means of providing services to the Roma community from the perspective of the community and relevant service providers and to identify and plan specific programs or services that might benefit Roma children, families, and their community. Since misconceptions surrounding Roma identity are thought to have a major impact on the effectiveness of service provision, this paper reviews the literature on historical and current factors that impact on Roma identity development. The effects of the construction of Roma identity are examined in light of service delivery.

ROMA IDENTITY

Although precise estimates are unknown, the Roma, numbering from seven to nine million, are Europe's largest minority (Brearley 2001). One of the issues in ascertaining a precise estimate of the population of Romani relates to identity construction. Some countries have only recently recognized Roma as an ethnic group for official purposes, while others have not. Roma people are reluctant to self-identify because of their history of oppression and forced assimilation and their distrust of authority.

According to Rummens (2000), identity construction is the process of developing personal and/or social identities for the self, either by individuals or groups. Roma identity is largely dependent on who is constructing identity. The Roma people of Hungary, for example, self-identify as a heterogeneous, sociocultural unit, and use the self-appellation of Roma to designate membership. Yet little empirical data is available to support this construction (Csepeli and Simon 2004). In contrast, the majority population of Hungary holds a Gypsy-image which is relatively "homogenous, stereotypical and fraught with negative bias" (129).

Researchers have offered a complex multi-faceted construction of identity. Petrova suggests that the Roma are a “continuum of more or less related subgroups with complex, flexible, and multilevel identities with sometimes strangely overlapping and confusing subgroup names” (Petrova 2003, 114). Marushiakova and Popov (2004) identify the Roma as a part of the Gypsy group, an ethnic community which migrated from India to Eastern Europe more than one thousand years ago. They suggest that Gypsies can be divided into a number of separate groups, subgroups, and meta-group units with their own ethnic and cultural features. The separate parts of the community have a group consciousness and alliance to a meta-group order, although they are typically clearly differentiated from one another. According to Marushiakova and Popov, the typical Gypsy community shares several common characteristics, including the presence of group consciousness, the use of a common language or another language among the Gypsies who lost their native Romani language, as well as common values, behavioural patterns, opinions, and moral principles.

The collective term “Roma” has been increasingly used to embrace, not only the Romani ethnic group found primarily in the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe, but other diverse groups such as the “Gitanos” of Spain, the “Travelers” of England and Ireland, and the “Sinti” of Germany and Italy (Goldston 2002). It is difficult to establish to what extent there is a shared consciousness among groups which are externally labeled as Gypsies, and, in fact, many groups see themselves as ethnically distinct and harbor negative attitudes towards others (Marushiakova and Vesselin 2004; Petrova).

HISTORICAL OPPRESSION

It is generally believed that ethnic Roma migrated from India some time before 1000 A.D. They had settled in the Balkans by the fourteenth century and were residing in most European cities by the fifteenth century (Brearley 2001). The history of the Romani people is one of relentless persecution, as Puxon states: “from the Middle Ages to the present day, they have been the target of racial discrimination and outright genocide” (1987, 1).

Until as late as 1973, Roma children, for example, were taken by force and given to non-Roma parents to rear. Romani were enslaved until the 1860s, well after slavery had been abolished in the West Indies. In the nineteenth century overt forms of persecution diminished; however, the advent of social Darwinism and Aryan racism led to the stigmatization of Roma as racially inferior (Brearley 2001).

During World War II, the majority of the Romani population was interned in concentration camps, often in special sections for medical experimentation and extermination (Alt and Folts 1996; Brearley 1996). An estimated one-half to 1.5 million Romani perished throughout Nazi-dominated Europe (Hancock 1989).

State policies instituted by Communist regimes after World War II were directed at forced assimilation of the Roma to “modernize and change the life of these backward groups and to make them equal to the developed ones in 10-20 years” (Csepeli and Simon, 130). These harsh measures were designed for a rapid change in lifestyle and a quick integration into society. Communist states were intolerant of Gypsy identity. They instituted policies to effectively ban the Romani language, forbade their nomadic lifestyle, forcibly stopped traditional forms of employment, enforced participation in labour, and forced settlement into state housing (Brearley 2001). Thousands of Roma women were forcibly sterilized in the 1970s and 1980s, and many Roma children were placed in orphanages (*ibid.*). State policies under Communist regimes led to some improvement in material conditions and reductions in inequities between Roma and non-Roma (Csepeli and Simon), and Roma were protected from open discrimination and violence from the majority population (Brearley 2001).

Since the fall of Communism, however, the Roma have continued to be “among the most hated, misunderstood, and mistreated of all people” (Goldston 147). Romani people have faced an “unprecedented financial insecurity, food shortages, and unemployment” (Brearley 2001, 592). They have endured unparalleled rates of racially based discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion from many aspects of mainstream life in Europe as a result of a rise in new forces of nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and other forms of intolerance (Petrova). Comprehensive anti-discriminatory laws do not exist in most post-Communist states, with many government officials denying the presence of racism, yet contributing to Roma oppression through their own public discourse (Goldston). Hate crimes are perpetuated against the Roma by state authorities, police, and majority citizens, most notably skinheads. Organized groups of skinheads with neo-Nazi, racist, and violent ideologies exist in most former Communist states in Europe, and specifically target Roma for violence (Brearley 2001).

Since the fall of Communism the Roma have begun to reclaim their ethnicity and advance Romani rights (Petrova). Roma have begun to use legal means to fight their oppression within their countries and, when unsuccessful, have turned to the European Court of Human Rights. At the same time as the Roma rights movement has emerged, European integration has put the protection of minority rights, and thus the rights of Roma, at the forefront.

CURRENT CONDITIONS OF ROMA IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

The Roma in Central and Eastern Europe are characterized by marginalization and oppression. The long-standing discrimination in the form of racial segregation in education (Goldston) has resulted in fewer than 20% of Roma with completed

primary education in nine of the ten countries surveyed (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2005).

A recent review of published literature on the health of Roma people concluded that surveillance and population health indices for the Roma are scarce to lacking (Zeman et al. 2003). It has been suggested that lack of visibility of the health care of Roma arises, not only because of the absence of research, but also the absence of advocacy on their behalf (Koupilova et al. 2000). The limited evidence available indicates that the health needs of the Roma are considerable and their health status is worse than that of the non-Roma population, with few exceptions. (Hajioff and McKee 2000; Koupilova et al. 2000). The health of Roma, as with other disenfranchised and impoverished groups, is related to their experience of poverty and oppression (Zemon et al. 2003).

Roma have unemployment rates in excess of 40%, likely as a result of labour market discrimination in combination with low skill and access to education (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS] 2002). Consequently, Roma, in general, are primarily reliant on state support for their survival with three to five times more Roma living below the poverty line compared to majority populations (UNDP 2005).

Roma are at risk for racially motivated violence (European Roma Rights Centre [ERRC] 1997) and abuse by authorities (Helsinki Human Rights Watch 1996a, 1996b). Roma are especially likely to be overrepresented in crime statistics, notably petty theft (Petrova 2003); and they receive discriminatory treatment in the judicial process, with longer periods of pre-trial detention and higher sentences when convicted (Helsinki 1996a).

ROMA IN CANADA

It is difficult to determine precise estimates of the current population of Romani in Canada, as no reliable published figures are available. It has been estimated that there are 80,000 Roma in Canada as a result of three major waves of migration since the late 1800s (Lee 1998). The initial migration of the Romani to Canada, the Vlach-Roma, began between the 1880s and the early twentieth century (Lee). The Vlach-Roma, numbering some 50,000 in Canada, is considered to be the most traditional of all Romani groups, sharing similar language, culture, and clan identities. There are also an estimated 20,000 Romanitchels who emigrated from the United Kingdom. Following the Second World War, a number of Romani immigrated to Canada, many from post-Communist countries. More recently, between 1997 and 2005, approximately 12,000 to 15,000 Roma left Eastern Europe, seeking asylum in the European Union (particularly the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Norway)

and Canada (Tanner 2005). Few Roma were successful, since they were perceived as coming from “safe” countries, did not present sufficient evidence to support a Geneva Convention claim, and were often considered economic migrants. Following the massive influx of Czech Roma, Canada began requiring visas for all visitors from the Czech Republic in 1997—a measure that affected non-Roma as well. Roma migration has somewhat decreased in recent years, partly due to improvements in their home countries, strict asylum regulations, and the “safe countries” principle.

Canada receives a large number of refugee claimants from Hungary, most of whom are members of the Roma community (International Centre for Migration Policy Development [ICMPD] 2001). Besides Hungary, the Roma in Norway and Slovenia are the only nationals within the European community that have this option of claiming refugee status in Canada available to them. According to the ICMPD, in 2000, while the majority of claims made by Hungarian nationals were rejected, the acceptance rate of refugees was 15%. The chances for a successful claim are much better in Canada than in European Union countries, where the rate of acceptance is from 0% to 1%. Helton states that recent decisions of the Canadian Supreme Court suggest the “Roma of Hungary may be appropriate for consideration as refugees under humanitarian standards concerning forced migration, particularly if they can establish highly individualized claims based on a well-founded fear of persecution.” (Helton 2003, conclusion par. 1). Canadian authorities, however, note a high rate of disappearance of Hungarian refugee claimants.

Available statistics on the Roma population paint a picture of a culture disadvantaged by marginalization and oppression. Thousands of Roma have migrated to Canada from Hungary, yet “very little is known about the actual circumstances of migration, the reasons of the migrants, or the later course of the emigrants’ lives” (Kováts 2002, 19). The only study the authors could find examining the migration experience of Hungarian Roma in Canada relied on participant observation of a single family living in southern Ontario (Hajnal 2002). Hajnal describes how his research “enquiries were met with distrust and suspicion even more intense than what I had come up against in Hungary” (ibid. 44) due to the family’s apprehension that Canadian immigration officials in Hungary could use the study findings against them.

Specific data on the living conditions and health and social welfare needs of Hungarian Roma newcomers in Canada are nonexistent. Few studies have investigated the utilization of social services among Canadian newcomers (Ma and Chi 2005). The disadvantage experienced by the Roma likely is not ameliorated with migration, but may be further compounded by cultural stereotypes that inhibit effective delivery of service. The voices of the Roma community and service providers, however, present a contrasting view of Roma identity informing how best to deliver services to Roma currently residing in Canada.

METHODOLOGY

The study received ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board at Sheridan College for Applied Arts and Technology in February 2004.

Purposeful sample selection was used to target two major groups in Hamilton, Ontario: 1) self-identified members of the Roma community and their self-identified leadership and 2) service providers to the Roma in the health, child welfare, immigration, education, social services, religious, and policing sectors. Multiple strategies were employed to identify and recruit the target populations. Roma leaders were self-identified community and/or religious leaders who described their role as representing the Roma community. In general, leaders had migrated earlier, had achieved refugee status, and were thus more willing to be interviewed than other community members. Using local leaders as informants, snowball techniques were used to find other community members. In addition, all self-identified Roma clients of the child protection agency were sent recruitment letters from the agency. Agency case workers followed-up with families to determine their willingness to participate. Study researchers compiled a comprehensive list of agencies providing service to the Roma across sectors, with additional agencies added as information became available (see Results below). Administrators from the targeted agencies were contacted by telephone and informed about the study. Agency personnel also assisted in selecting potential participants for focus groups.

All participants were volunteers who provided written informed consent. Roma members were given ten dollars in food vouchers to offset costs of participation. All study materials were independently translated into Hungarian and translated back into English by two certified translators with child welfare experience. Hungarian/English translation was provided for the focus groups with Roma participants. Focus groups and the key informant interview were conducted between April and September 2004 within each participating agency, homes of the Roma members, or another community agency. Roma participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire. A trained moderator led the focus group (or individual interview) using a field guide developed for the study. The field guide consisted of general and broad questions concerning the needs of the Roma community. Interviews which were approximately 1.5 hours long were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The data was independently analyzed and classified by two researchers. The following major themes emerged: identity, oppression, child welfare, education, health, social welfare, immigration, and criminal justice. Within each theme, the views of the Roma community members were summarized and compared to the perspectives of service providers. This paper, therefore, reports on the identity construction of Roma from a small sample of Roma and service providers from diverse sectors in Hamilton, Ontario.

RESULTS

Sample

Three key informant interviews with self-identified Roma leaders, one focus group with Vlach men (n=4), one with women (n=4), a mixed group (five men and three women) of Romungro, and a sample of Vlach Roma from child protection (two men and three women) were interviewed for a total of 24 Roma participants. All participants were recent immigrants from Hungary seeking refugee status. The majority of the sample was male (56%) with a mean age of 33.3 years (SD = 5.2). Most participants reported being single (45.5%), followed by divorced (36.4%), married (9.1%), or separated (9.1%). All respondents had children with an average of 2 children (SD = 1.1) per family. They described their ethnicity and their first language as either Hungarian or Roma. The majority of the sample reported having some or completed elementary school (72.7%), with difficulties in speaking and writing English (72.7%). Respondents reported the major source of income was through full-time work (54.5%), government assistance (36.4%), or part-time work (9.1%). The total annual income reported ranged from \$10,000 to \$69,999; 54.5% of the sample reported earning between \$10,000 and \$19,999. None of the respondents reported having any physical or mental health problems.

A community-based non-profit agency providing primary health care education and advocacy and a key informant from the religious sector declined to participate in the study. All other selected agencies agreed. Participants from the following sectors were represented: child welfare (n=8); education (Catholic n=8; public n=6; heritage language n=1); health (public health n=3; community health n=2; hospital maternity n=3); immigration (government n=3; lawyers n=2; community n=11); police (n=5); and social assistance (n=10). In total 62 individuals representing 11 service agencies from diverse sectors were interviewed.

a) Identity

Roma

In describing their identity, members of the Roma community in Hamilton focused on their ethnicity as comprised of a number of salient features. Ethnic features were viewed as integral and shared with Roma all over the world. Roma were united by their lack of homeland, a shared language, culture, and values. However, differences in culture and divisions within Roma communities were noted both within their country of origin, their country of settlement, and among Roma who reside in other countries. Members of the Romungro group, for example, stated that they did not like to be called Roma and preferred the name Gypsy or "Czigan."

The absence of a homeland was a central theme for members of the Roma community. As one woman commented:

The Roma don't have a homeland. They can't say, "I'm a Hungarian Roma, because I live in Hungary." It's just the place you live. If we had a country just like the Hungarians, Italians, or other nationalities, because every nation has their own country, we can't say that we are going home. Now we live in Canada, actually now this is our homeland. But if we go to Australia, it's just the same, Hungary or Canada; there is no Roma Land.

The lack of a homeland was linked by participants to their minority status and their experience of oppression, as one Roma participant stated:

This is a nation without land, without flag, without representation, we don't have ministers or a Prime Minister. So, wherever we go, we always have been and are always going to be a minority, regardless of what country we live in. Here in Canada we are still a minority, but here there are other minorities as well.

Roma participants linked their minority status to feeling "marginalized and persecuted," suggesting that Roma have been "cut literally, and have scars inside, and we carry these with us everywhere." Freedom was seen as the antithesis of oppression: "we love freedom, which we have here."

The value placed on family and family cohesiveness by Roma was viewed as a defining cultural feature:

The Roma are very family oriented; they love their family very much. They are very close. We have very close relationships with the parents, with the siblings, with the children. And the broader family is also very tight. The brotherhood and sisterhood is very strong.

Another woman stated:

Our family is very important to us; there is nothing we wouldn't do or sacrifice for our children. We would rather go and work, even if it's the most menial task, to provide food for our family, than to wait around and spend the time in school learning language or job skills.

The nature of Roma gendered relationships was seen as a defining in-group feature in contrast to the majority culture. One woman stated that "Roma women respect their men much more than, for example, the Hungarians. . . . I would say that we look up to men...that they are the head of the family." Another added that the male head of the household was responsible for all decision-making. A gendered division of labour, as described by a female participant, was also noted as characteristic: "the men take part in raising children, but this is mostly the mother's job. The women's job—to make sure that the house is clean; she is obliged to raise the kids; have a hot meal cooked every day; when the family and friends come—to serve them."

Language was seen as a uniting influence for all Romani. “We speak the same language, and I think our culture is basically the same,” stated a Roma leader. He qualified the statement by noting that there are those “within the Roma ethnicity who don’t speak the Romani language.”

Religion for Hungarian Roma—primarily Christian with aspects of their own specific belief systems—was also noted as an important defining feature for the Roma.

You need to know, that the Roma are religious people. Generation to generation the tradition is that from childhood, like when I was growing up, knowing that there is God. So the religion, the faith is very strong in the Roma population. So they know God.

Although physical characteristics were not a major focus of identity for many Roma community members, one male participant identified physical characteristics as the second most important distinguishing feature. “I would define the Roma first of all by the character and beyond this by the visible features. Our skin is Creole...the skull and the face is circular shape. So it’s not oval or long face.” Another participant added:

Mostly we have black hair, blond is very rare. Blue eyes and blond hair are not usual characteristics. I would rather say, that we look more like Latin people or Spanish, lot of people mistake us for the Latin, I hear a lot if I was Italian or Portuguese, because my facial features are more like Latin.

Cultural features noted by Roma participants included style of dress, hair, love of music, and participation in traditional occupations as illustrated by the following quotes:

The women’s skirts...they like red and floral prints and bright colors and the skirt is usually ankle length for the women because they cannot wear short skirts, men ...like bright colors too.

They never cut the hair of the little girls at least until they get married, sometimes even after; they keep the long hair as long as possible. In our culture you can’t cut the hair.

We love music. My family was a musician family, entertainer family. We love to play the instruments, the music, to sing and dance.

Another added: Roma are very lively folks. Its common knowledge that they like to party, they like to live well. . . .They love music, jamming.

Like any other ethnicity [Roma] has a unique trade. . . .traditionally they lived on horse-trading. Roma traditionally make wooden spoons and different kinds of tubs, dugouts, which are used and very widespread in Europe until this day. And lots of them make their living on these trades.

Service providers

Roma identity provided by service providers included relatively accurate information, lack of information, misinformation, and information that contained stereotypes and biases. The construction of Roma identity for service providers was rich in stereotypes, biases, and negative attributions in contrast to Roma participants who did not spontaneously discuss biases, myths, and stereotypes.

Some individual participants demonstrated a sophisticated knowledge of Roma with respect to country of origin. As one individual said:

I think we make the mistake as associating them with the country, like Hungary, they don't see any problem being Hungarian, we're acknowledging that in Europe they are also in all the countries. And they consider themselves Roma; I've seen them in Italy, I've seen them in England, they've been in Scotland, I mean they are all over the world.

Another participant stated:

Maybe we are unfairly pigeonholing them at simply being Hungarian. My understanding is that they are very transient group. Roma, I think, they are more cultural in nature, and they are from, I think, I'm maybe wrong, they are from largely all around Eastern Europe and that Hungary, as I understand, has been as a result of all the civil unrest, what have been going on in Eastern Europe.

One focus group member described the Roma immigration to Canada:

There was lot of publicity in the Czech Republic aimed at the Roma community to come to Canada because it was a great place and all you have to do is come and have a great life. After that they started arriving from the Czech Republic, and then the Hungarian Roma started coming after. That's when we had our biggest number of them. I hadn't heard of the term Roma, we just called them the gypsy people and I think in that term everybody understands. They are a mystery. Nobody really knows them, nobody really explained it to me the origins, exactly where they come from—their language—and you find them [in] almost every country in Europe—but they have some connections to each other.

One service provider offered an evolving, complex definition of Roma identity:

Well, they usually ended up being individuals who came from Hungary. So I just treated them as or considered them individuals coming from Hungary. They speak Hungarian language. So my first definition was people who don't speak English or people I can help with Hungarian. And then after that I just started to recognize some features, perhaps a little bit darker skin, the darker hair, bit louder than perhaps other individuals. They seem to be a very tight-knit group of individuals, but I didn't really try to categorize them. So that's my definition. I know that they have a different kind of opinion about them in Hungary, so then I started hearing different experiences.

A number of service providers commented on the historical and current oppression experienced by the Roma:

Not many people here in Hamilton know about the Roma in the historical point of view. They have been discriminated and ostracized and for many years, and I'm not even really sure the Roma is really from Hungary, I think they might have been originated centuries ago north of Moscow in Russia, and because of the persecution they experienced centuries ago, they always had to move to different locations, and once they set up in that region that you've mentioned, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Armenia, those type of places, they were ostracized and a lot were killed in the war. In World War II, 5000 were killed off, and they were refugees and stayed in camp. When their children went to school, they went to separate schools from the other Hungarians, and so they were discriminated in terms of...every area you could think of, in terms of education, in terms of housing, in terms of employment, in terms of where could they move in resident areas, so they were constantly segregated from the rest of the population. And was dispersed to other places such as England or France and Italy — they met the same type of discrimination. So they were always used to being harassed, interrogated, genocide, and ethnocide so they always had to move. That's why they call them nomadic people, because they always learned that they had to move, they couldn't trust. So because of the ostracization they've experienced all over the world from the people, they developed this defense mechanism, what we know now as the part of their culture: not to trust anyone, not for long try to assimilate to anyone. And they do focus a lot on trades as opposed to academic success and academic future, with everything, so they know they could go to school, develop a trade, to develop a profession, that's what they are interested in.

Participants noted that historical oppression in Hungary limited the support that was available from the Hungarian community in Canada. One noted:

I think there are a lot of negative feelings between certain Hungarian cultural groups and this Roma group, and they overlap. And the certain idea of stereotype was being transferred over. So I don't think that is necessarily a part of the support network out there between the Hungarian community itself and the Roma community. There seem to be a fair amount of divisions, it's not automatic that the Hungarian community is supporting and backing the Hungarian Roma community.

A service provider proposed a causal link between the Roma's experience of oppression and current difficulties in accessing services effectively, stating that it was important to recognize the association:

The fact that, because over the years, for centuries of being ostracized in their home countries, in my understanding for fact that they had no welfare system to say...or not for the gypsies, or the amounts not the same as a white person, so back there the police is very much corrupt, when they come here, they don't have the trust for the police, and in their own community there would be problems because they collaborate with the police.

Most service providers expressed a lack of basic knowledge of the culture and needs of the Roma. They found few sources for this information and had to rely on their own individual interactions with Roma or, at times, misinformed or biased information from other sources. This lack of knowledge was identified as impacting on their ability to effectively serve the Roma. One participant in the educational sector stated:

Nowhere when these children are admitted to school does it say that this is Roma. They only occasionally, and I say occasionally, identify themselves as Roma. As “I speak Roma, I have another language.” But they typically think of themselves as we say, “What’s your language?” They’ll say Hungarian or Czech. But as the year goes on they come out and say, “I have another language.”

Examples of erroneous information included service providers’ understanding of the origins of the Roma. One participant suggested that “Roma people originate from Romania, but I could be very wrong, that could be wrong.” Another member thought that the Roma were “all Hungarians, that’s what I thought. Like everybody came from Hungary.” Another suggested: “probably they live in the woods by the town or city, from what I’ve seen.”

Service providers acknowledged that the use of the term “gypsies” was unflattering for the Roma: “They are offended when this term is used.” However, in their descriptions of the Roma identity, Gypsy was frequently used: “Well, I think that we are more familiar with the term ‘Gypsy,’ and I think that’s what most people would be more familiar with. When I use the term “Roma,” I don’t think many people know what it means.” Others expressed confusion over the different terminology. A participant stated that she was, “really confused, because in the school I’ve been dealing with a lot of Roma, gypsies, and they don’t see themselves...I actually thought there was a difference between the Gypsy and the Roma...so I’m totally confused.” Another focus group member stated:

For the longest time I thought that the Roma were the gypsies. I talked to a lot of them. They either denied or they said they are Hungarian. They are Roma, they are gypsies. We never seemed to know what they happened to be at times, so I don’t know myself exactly what it is we are talking about.

Analysis of the identity information provided by participants suggests that service providers need to have increased access to information about the history, culture, and values of the Roma, and that Roma should be involved in developing and disseminating this information.

b) Stereotypes*Roma*

Roma articulated that they had been “totally oppressed all over the world,” and that stereotypes about the Roma included that they are “filthy, lazy, stinky,...and that they steal, rob, lie, kill, whatever bad things you can think of they say about the Roma.” Roma participants stated that these beliefs impacted on their daily functioning and contributed to their oppression. They suggested that what was needed to dispel these myths was an increased education for service providers about the history, culture and unique needs of the immigrant or refugee community, delivered in partnership with community members, and having specific emphasis on activities designed to address stereotypes and biases. As one Roma informant suggested:

If the service providers want to have more education about the Roma, their culture, their castes, groups, clans, we would like to be a part of it through — like a reference book; introduce all kinds of Roma, their culture, traditions, and customs. What is good, what is not, black and white, to put it in perspective.

Service Providers

The lack of information and misinformation contributed to negative stereotypes. Common stereotypes articulated by service providers included the failure of the Roma to integrate into mainstream society, their lack of understanding of the value of education, and their involvement in crime. As one participant commented, “They are very secretive. I have a Lithuanian background, and in Lithuania they also know of the gypsies, and they have their view of them as well. Similar view: negative view.” Another participant acknowledged that she was exposed to negative stereotypes. According to one informant, the Roma are

European people that are on the fringes of the general society and they are very transient. They are also a separate subculture within that existing European community, and they really don't blend in very well. They don't really accept the social norms of work, so, but these are... Most of them, unfortunately most of them, the hearsay I got was negative. That they don't blend in, they are lazy, and they don't want to work.... Most of it was negative.

Some service providers acknowledged difficulties with the stereotypes and biases that are prevalent: “You know it hurt me to categorize a group of people this way.” Other service providers adopted the negative attributions in the face of a lack of personal experience or engaged with the Roma in ways that confirmed these beliefs.

Most of the time they do stealing, and they steal, and after that they have problems with immigration, and most of the time their cases are not successful, and they have to be returned back, and sometimes the police would go and pick them out and return them

... and this is what I've heard from other people, but it's never something I have experienced myself.

I've seen that they are very difficult to deal with, they are lying to us, they exchange IDs with one another. They get in trouble like stealing. They switch plates on cars. I haven't found any redeeming qualities to jump out at me. If that makes me racist or....I've been through lots of movement of people in Canada, Ugandans, people from Vietnam, boat people, people from the Iron Curtain countries, including Hungary, but it was before my time. This is the one movement of people I have found absolutely outstanding. Because everybody else blends in, everybody else loves being in Canada, and they work hard, and they want to contribute to the society.

A number of service providers asserted that the Roma ascribed a low value to education, which they linked with involvement with criminal behaviour. Few, however, were able to link current and historical oppression and marginalization with disengagement.

Other communities pushed their kids toward continuing their education. The Roma community has not. In their priorities it's not as high, that's my understanding anyways. So to go for higher education or education...so that...it's not a priority, that's my understanding anyways. Health care...all of the reasons to educate, career options are not as numerous and viable. So the other communities push, push, push, so they might end up getting new jobs, but in the Roma community education is not considered a viable alternative. Then automatically they perhaps turn to alternative ways to get...more community members will be involved in crime.

Although focus group members expressed some differences between the Roma community and other immigrant communities, many similarities and common needs were noted. One participant stated that it was her opinion that the Roma community was not "more difficult to serve than any other community, but there are a lot of different issues with any community, I mean there are language barriers with everyone."

Roma community members and service providers recommended that comprehensive, coordinated, and integrated services are necessary to orient and support the settlement and integration of immigrants and refugees. Suggested services included increased community-based, culturally-sensitive outreach, and education for service providers about the values, culture, and history of newcomers delivered in partnership with community members. The need for greater understanding of diversity within newcomer communities and the developing of meaningful relationships with newcomer communities was also acknowledged.

DISCUSSION

Canada is a mosaic of cultures, and while this is a unique characteristic of our country, it presents issues in delivering culturally appropriate services that meet the needs

of such a diverse population. This challenge is highlighted when both service providers and clientele realize that the services being offered and delivered are ineffective in meeting the needs of certain populations. The Roma Project demonstrated how service providers could enter into working relationships misinformed about basic information such as cultural identity, values, and norms of newcomers. The dual perspectives provided throughout this study emphasized the danger in working with communities based on assumptions and stereotypes. The participant responses presented a picture of service delivery, openly admitting to the lack of knowledge about the Roma community: verbalizing the stereotypes that created the Roma identity, and the voices of the Roma recognizing the stereotypes that interfered with access and delivery of service.

In the European Union, Roma have begun to use legal means to fight their oppression and dispel some of the associated pervasive myths and stereotypes within their countries, and, when unsuccessful, have turned to the European Court of Human Rights. At the same time as the Roma rights movement has emerged, European integration has put the protection of minority rights, and thus the rights of Roma, at the forefront. Roma participants in the Roma Project were also assertive in advancing their rights through the creation of a community centre to preserve language and culture, as well as asserting claims specifically within the child welfare domain. For example, a Roma leader asserted his belief:

Children are taken away from Roma families with no reason, and then they are given to strangers. I don't know the law, but it would be good to have an information session, and if the directors of the Children's Aid would tell us more about our rights. And not only, about our rights, but the support that we could get from them. Because if they have the right to take my child, then they should have the right to help me if it's necessary.

The biases and stereotypes that impacted on the delivery of services were also witnessed in the difficulty in identifying, recruiting, and engaging Roma participants. Roma community members clearly articulated a distrust of the research agenda and research process. Many individuals were reluctant to formally participate in the research project. For example, some individuals were unwilling to sign consent forms, although they were given the options of using pseudonyms, as they feared it would impact on their immigration application or status. They identified that they did not trust any government-funded research because there has been "numerous examples of that, and somebody is ending up with a desk job in a government office, and no benefits for the Roma." The Roma clearly stated that they have been the subject of research, but have not been the beneficiary of knowledge production. As one participant stated, "the Roma ethnicity has been researched endlessly several times, but not once had they seen results."

The results from the Roma Project clearly demonstrated that Roma concerns were not unfounded. Discussion around Roma identity demonstrated congruence between the Roma community and service providers around the absence of homeland, historical and current oppression, and knowledge of stereotypes surrounding the Roma population. Perhaps even more of a concern was the admitted lack of understanding about the cultural values and norms that influenced perceptions of the Roma population and that defined the Roma as unworkable within the limits of human service delivery. (Service providers are not immune to the negative discourse surrounding the Roma people.) It seems unlikely that the perception of the Roma as “unworkable” is based on real differences in the values, norms, and behaviours of the Roma compared to mainstream Canadians. It is perhaps more likely, as this research suggests, that the disjuncture lies with the lack of knowledge and the misperceptions and biases held by service providers. Further research is necessary to more fully address this question. In the absence of this knowledge, enhanced education delivered in partnership with Roma is critical in addressing commonly held stereotypes and biases and in developing services that are culturally appropriate and sensitive to meeting the needs of the Roma population.

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CHRISTINE WALSH is an assistant professor in the faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary. Her research interests concern the examination of the social determinants of health for marginalized populations, including immigrants, the homeless, and those affected by poverty or violence.

BRIGETTE KRIEG is a faculty/programme co-ordinator with First Nations University of Canada. She is currently working on her doctorate at the faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, studying the marginalization of Indigenous women.