The Roma in Spanish Higher Education: A Case Study of Successful Trajectories (0047)

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study based on the analysis of successful trajectories of four university Roma students in Spain. The paper is located within the context of initiatives developed in Spain to promote access of Roma to higher education, including identification of factors that promote or hinder access, retention and completion (FSG, 2008). The methodology is based on biographical-narrative interviews, used to deepen the unique way in which these factors affect or do not affect the individual trajectories as well as the strategies and resilience mechanisms that these students have implemented to achieve their goals and life projects. Far from providing generalisations on Roma, the findings of this study allow us to draw experiences and singular trajectories that illustrate the difficulties of Roma in university. Ultimately, this paper aims at disseminating different "models" of Roma that could contribute to change the stereotypes that still persist in Spanish society.

Paper

Since 1989 Spain has developed a very active role in the promotion of Roma social and educational inclusion and, as a consequence, this country has gained international recognition as the so-called "Spanish model for Roma inclusion", which is based on a widely inclusive, universal welfare system. The current legal and political situation derives from the European Commission recommendations[1] that have inspired the

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1Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the regions *An EU Framework for National*

National Roma Integration Strategy for 2012-2020 (Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality, 2011), which sets out quantitative goals to be reached in 2020. However, as indicated in the Spanish Civil Society Monitoring Report (Laparra, Fernández, Hernández, Salinas & Cedrón, 2013) governmental investment in education has dropped since 2010, as a consequence of the economic crisis and the derived austerity measures.

Existing statistics reveal a poor participation of Roma people in higher education. Laparra (2007) reported that only between 0.3 and 1.2% of the Roma population has a university degree, whereas for the non-Roma population the percentage is 22.3%. The promotion of higher education among Roma is really needed but a detailed analysis of the National Strategy reveals that there is not a defined approach that advocates for a greater presence of Roma at university, this objective being just a part of the general aim of "increasing the level of education of Roma" (Padilla-Carmona and Soria-Vílchez, 2015).

This paper deals with the analysis of successful trajectories of four university Roma graduates in Spain, emphasising some of the key factors in their decisions. Biographical-narrative interviews have been carried out to deepen the unique way in which some factors may affect either in a positive or a negative way the individual trajectories.

One factor that appears to be relevant in our analysis is the "normalised" family context, as opposed to a marginalised context. We refer to the fact that their families are not always socially, culturally and economical different from the general population. That is the case, for instance, of Jerez de la Frontera, the city of origin of

Antro (male). In Jerez de la Frontera, as in some other parts of Andalusia, Roma people are historically integrated into the general population. Relations between Roma and non-Roma are good and the discrimination attitudes that persist in other Spanish populations (see for example, Spanish Centre for Sociological Research, 2013) are not common.

Besides the geographical area, the parents' ways of earning a living also brings "normalisation" into scene. Flora, a recently graduated student, suggests that rejection of education is not an intrinsic feature of Roma culture but a specific characteristic of marginalisation culture.

> *I think that it is not a matter of Roma people don't like education, but that marginalisation opposes to it. If you see the cases of Lebrija, or Jerez, there are many Roma young people that have studied. It doesn't depend of the culture but on the context in which you are.* (Flora, woman, interview).

The "normalised" context leads to conceptions of education as a means to get social promotion strongly rooted in the family context. As a consequence, going to school was the obvious option for our interviewees when they were children. But family support was, in some cases, ambivalent: Positive and helpful on the side of the parents and siblings, but opposed and contrary on the side of the rest of the relatives (especially, the older ones). These relatives tried hard to instil the traditional patterns in a differential and gendered way for women (getting married and homemaking) and men (working to earn a living).

> *My grandmother didn't encourage me very much, she told me once and again that what I had to do was looking for a work, that I was an idler and didn't like working .*(Refre, man, interview)

The "pressure" by older relatives or broader community is also related to Roma identity in two of the cases (Gaviota, woman, and Refre, man). Getting trained was seen as a loss of their Roma culture, a lack of Roma traditional identity.

> *Some Roma people think you are ´payo´[2] just because you are studying.*
> (Refre, man, interview)

The four cases in study reflected some tensions in their identity. Building up their own identity as Roma as well as (university) student involved struggle, coping strategies and multiple impacts related to self-conception, as suggested by Bereményi and Carrasco (2015). On the one hand, all of the students have experienced mainstreaming schooling and refer to themselves as "normal students, as someone else in the classroom". But they insist on the fact that the sense of being "like others" does not imply a loss of their Roma identity. All of them perceive themselves as Roma and account for the feeling of pride and compromise regarding their ethnicity.

But "being normal as someone else" is an elusive concept. Mates or teachers' reactions when discovering they are "gypsies" –and their impact on identity- used to manifest in different senses:

- Surprise, as others think they "do not look" like gypsy people. So, if they "looked" the same (and "behaved" the same), they were welcome.

- Difficulty, for teachers to tackle the situation, as they demand educational contents to include their own culture.

- In extreme, rare cases, clear rejection and public ridicule that never meant a problem for them.

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2 ´Payo´is the name used by Spanish Roma people to refer to ´non Roma´.

Finally, we want to emphasise their strong motivation to change the status quo, to contribute to a new and more realistic social image of Roma. Their career and personal decisions are oriented by the idea of "doing" something for Roma people, of changing and improving social attitudes towards them, and especially of visualising other forms of being Roma. To this last idea of visualising positive models for Roma people is what this paper aims to contribute to.

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