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# Intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity and life satisfaction of Roma minority adolescents and their parents



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates intergeneration transmission of ethnic identity as a resource for life satisfaction of Roma adolescents and their parents. Historically, Roma represent the largest ethnic minority in Europe. They have been exposed to severe discrimination, social exclusion, and poverty. Therefore, identifying resources for their life satisfaction is theoretically and practically important. The present study included 1093 participants, of which there were 171 Roma adolescents (age:  $M = 14.96$  years,  $SD = 1.85$ ), 155 mothers (age:  $M = 36.16$  years,  $SD = 5.77$ ) and 123 fathers (age:  $M = 39.68$  years,  $SD = 6.06$ ). Further, a comparison group of 248 mainstream adolescents with their mothers ( $n = 221$ ) and fathers ( $n = 175$ ) was also included in the study. Adolescents and their parents provided data on ethnic identity (MEIM; [Phinney, 1992](#)) and life satisfaction (SWLS; [Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985](#)). Results indicated that Roma youth were lower on endorsement of ethnic identity and average on life satisfaction compared to their mainstream peers. A structural equation model showed that ethnic identity was a positive predictor of life satisfaction for both adolescents and their Roma parents. Furthermore, parents' ethnic identity was a predictor of adolescent life satisfaction. We concluded that for Roma youth and their parents, ethnic identity represents a salient source for life satisfaction and an intergenerational continuity of identity and life satisfaction exists.

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Intergenerational transmission is only one dimension of a wide variety and range of activities and exchanges that can occur between different generations. Intergenerational transmission is defined as the process through which earlier generations psychologically influence attitudes and behaviors of the next generation, and is usually examined in two or more generations of participants ([van Ijzendoorn, 1992](#); [Serbin & Karp, 2003](#)). This study investigates intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity among a sample of Roma adolescents and their parents, and its relation to their life satisfaction compared to a sample of Bulgarian mainstream youth with their mothers and fathers. Roma are the largest indigenous minority group in Europe, characterized by marked social marginalization and in most cases unique continuous life challenges ([European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2010](#); [Gerganov, Varbanova, & Kyuchukov, 2005](#)). Although multiple generational ties exist in the Roma population, intergenerational transmission has not been studied in the Roma community to the extent one may expect. The main focus on this study is on Roma families with adolescent children living in Bulgaria as this is a marginalized social group. Yet, scholars have acknowledged the importance of understanding intersections between

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minority and mainstream or dominant groups as a way to work against the reification of mainstream groups as the lone representation of normativity (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Other studies with ethnic minority samples in several instances also utilized mainstream groups which informed our approach to the present study (e.g., Crocetti, Fermani, Pojaghi, & Meeus, 2011; Güngör, Fleischmann, & Phalet, 2011; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2009). This study acknowledges this argumentation and prior empirical precedent by taking into account a group of mainstream youth with Bulgarian ethnic heritage in comparison to their peers with Roma ethnic background.

In Bulgaria 89% of Roma students have a primary school education, 10% have a secondary education as a final education level in adulthood (Ringold, 2000). Also, in Bulgaria official policies on improvement of their conditions are scarce or suffer from a lack of follow through (Amnesty International, 2007; Civil Society Monitoring Report Bulgaria, 2013). Marginalization of the Roma population remains a concern. In order to promote inclusion and decrease economic strain of marginalized groups, the World Bank and the Open Society Institute have taken steps to promote education, housing, employment and physical health programs for Roma (Ringold, Orenstein, & Wilkens, 2005). Although these programs may be beneficial for economic and social welfare inclusion, there remain significant gaps in understanding individual and intergenerational resources that may support life satisfaction among Roma, from the standpoint of normative developmental processes such as identity development. This study is novel in that it promotes understanding of Roma as an important ethnic minority in Europe with unique socio-cultural features and a long history of marginalization. We address relevant research in this group by adding important methodological and conceptual contributions to the literature. We know little if anything about Roma compared to other ethnic minorities and the sparsely available research has rarely investigated positive aspects in Bulgarian Roma families, such as life satisfaction as a part of positive development. We also add important findings to what is known about the joint role mothers' and fathers' ethnic identity may play in their adolescent child's ethnic identity and life satisfaction. This is a little researched area for Roma families in Bulgaria and we also have the strength of having a comparison group of families who are in the Bulgarian mainstream society. Therefore, we investigated intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity, and attempted to document the ways in which ethnic identity may function as a resource for well-being of Roma adolescents and their parents.

### **Ethnic identity and life satisfaction**

Ethnic identity concerns the process of identification with an ethnic or cultural group accompanied by a sense of belonging, relatedness, and commitment to that group (Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Ong, 2007). Ethnic identity development is not static, but part of an ongoing process that involves combinations of the presence and absence of exploration and commitment (i.e., identity diffusion to achievement; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). An important distinction in the use of the term ethnic identity is warranted. The term is often used in the sense of an ethnic minority/immigrant identity based on cultural heritage. However, in this study, we referred to ethnic identity in terms of identification with the dominant culture (Bulgaria) for mainstream youth and identification with the ethnic culture (Roma) in the Roma minority group. Such operational definitions and measurement of ethnic identity have been used in the literature (e.g., Barany, 2001; Prieto-Flores, 2009).

In large scale of multi-ethnic youth, findings showed that achieving a stable, positive identity can be challenging (Crocetti et al., 2011). It has also consistently been reported that an optimally developed ethnic identity, which is characterized by strong sense of attachment or belonging to one's ethnic group, identifying and engaging with ethnic practices and recognizing positive virtues about own ethnic group, is positively related to life satisfaction and psychosocial adjustment in various ethnic minority groups (e.g., Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Schwartz et al., 2009; Smith & Silva, 2011). The strong relationship between ethnic identity and life satisfaction has also been documented in Roma youth in Eastern Europe (Dimitrova, Chasiotis, Bender, & van de Vijver, 2014). Relatedly, studies have shown that older adolescents had a clearer and more firmly defined sense of ethnic identity relative to younger adolescents (e.g., French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006). Moreover, gender differences may exist in that identifying with one's ethnic group is more important for adolescent girls than boys (Yip & Fuligni, 2002).

With regards to Roma youth, little is known about ethnic identity of Roma. Of the existing scarce literature, the findings are inconclusive and mixed. Most are based on cross-sectional studies using specifically developed quantitative instruments to measure ethnic identity. For example, a tendency among Roma to identify with the national mainstream culture has been observed in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Barany, 2001; Prieto-Flores, 2009), as well as among Roma living in Western Europe (e.g., Marushiakova & Popov, 1993). It has also been found that Roma youth and their mothers have reported, on average, moderate levels of endorsement of both Bulgarian national and Roma ethnic identity (Dimitrova et al., 2014). Based on such findings, no recommendations can be given to Roma youth in Bulgaria since more documentation of how these youth are identifying is needed. A goal of the present study is to pursue more information about youth identity development within the Roma population.

The purpose of this study was to explore the relations between optimally developed ethnic identity (i.e., strong sense of attachment, belonging and engaging with ethnic practices of the Roma group) and life satisfaction for Roma youth and their parents in comparison to a group of Bulgarian mainstream youth with their mothers and fathers (i.e., their ethnic identity as a sense of attachment and belonging to the Bulgarian group). Although complex and sometimes disparate findings exist for Roma families, prior work on ethnic identity has shown it often to be strength related to well-being among ethnic minority populations (e.g., Smith & Silva, 2011). We acknowledge the diversity in prior work by addressing the question of whether

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