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## Anti-Roma attitudes as expressions of dominant social norms in Eastern Europe



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### ABSTRACT

Although one of the most severe forms of bias all over Europe, anti-Roma prejudice has been neglected within social psychology. We argue that anti-Roma attitudes need to be recognized as a unique form of prejudice because (a) they reflect socially approved dominant societal norms, (b) intergroup contact increases rather than decreases prejudice, and (c) not just negative stereotyping, but also cultural distancing of Roma people is a form of social exclusion. We developed an integrative Attitudes Toward Roma Scale (ATRS) based on existing measures and theoretical assumptions about prejudice toward Roma people. We conducted a study ( $N = 1082$ ) relying on student and community samples in Hungary and Slovakia. Exploratory factor analysis revealed and confirmatory factor analysis supported the structural equivalence of a three-factor solution of the 16-item scale, consisting of *Blatant Stereotyping*, *Undeserved Benefits*, and *Cultural Difference*.

Our findings confirmed that intergroup contact with Roma people is associated with more negative attitudes, and prejudice is mostly expressed in blatantly negative ways, made possible by social contexts that approve of these beliefs. The analysis also revealed that essentialist, romanticized ideas of cultural differences between Roma and non-Roma populations contribute to the psychological distancing of Roma people from the national ingroup.

### Introduction

Anti-Roma prejudice is prevalent and severe on a personal, institutional, and state level in many European countries, and especially in Eastern Europe where Roma people constitute a large ethnic minority group. A racially motivated serial killing in Hungary, expulsion of Roma people from France and Italy, walls built to fence off the Roma population in cities in the Czech Republic, Romania, and Slovakia, the overrepresentation of Roma children in special education, and of Roma in prisons all demonstrate the depth of the problem (see e.g., Barberet & García-España, 1997; Brügemann & Škobla, 2014; Kende & Neményi, 2006). The Roma are an ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse group with a long history of severe discrimination, marginalization, and poverty (Feischmidt, Szombati, & Szuhay, 2013; Fraser, 1995; Ladányi, 2001; Pogány, 2006). Both before and following the Porrajmos (the Roma Holocaust in the Second World War which cost 2–5 hundred thousand lives, Hancock, 2004), the history of the Roma minority attested to different waves of forced and unsuccessful assimilation and ethnic tensions resulting in widespread discrimination in all areas of social life (see Barany, 2000; Filčák, Szilvasi, & Škobla, 2017).

Although the situation of the Roma attracted a great deal of attention among ethnographers, cultural anthropologists, and sociologists, there have been few studies by social psychologists on anti-Roma attitudes as a form of prejudice (for some exceptions see

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Bigazzi, 2012; Dunbar & Simonova, 2003; Hnilica & Radová, 2013; Ljubic, Vedder, Dekker, & van Geel, 2013; Váradi, 2014; Villano et al., 2017). Consequently, there is a lack of understanding of the psychological processes involved in anti-Roma prejudice, and how these attitudes relate to other forms of racial and ethnic bias. Ljubic, Vedder, Dekker, and van Geel (2012) suggested that anti-Roma prejudice has unique characteristics, as the phenomenon can only be partially explained by generalized group based enmity (Zick et al., 2008). We therefore set out to investigate the psychological mechanisms of prejudice against Roma people in the Eastern European social context from a social psychological perspective.

### Anti-Roma prejudice as a special form of ethnic bias

The overt expression of prejudice is counternormative in societies with egalitarian social values, putting pressure on individuals to act in prejudice-free ways (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Durrheim, Quale, & Dixon, 2016). In these societies, people are motivated to appear non-prejudiced to suppress its expression in order to conform to the general egalitarian norms (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). Therefore, one important question related to anti-Roma prejudice is whether people feel that their negative reactions to Roma are justifiable according to accepted social norms. This would mean that egalitarian social norms do not apply to Roma–non-Roma relations, and prejudice against them can be openly expressed.

The level of external or internal motivation to appear non-prejudiced determines whether existing negative feelings are expressed openly or remain suppressed. High external motivation to respond without prejudice would reflect that the individual is exhibiting public conformity to social norms, while internal motivation to respond without prejudice is a sign of internalized non-prejudicial attitudes (Plant & Devine, 1998). Interestingly however, in intergroup contexts in which prejudice is perceived as appropriate, high external motivation and low internal motivation lead to open rather than suppressed expression of prejudice (Forscher, Cox, Gaertz, & Devine, 2015). The importance of social norms and the normative appropriateness of prejudice have been underlined by studies that established strong correlations between perceived prejudicial norms and either individually reported levels of prejudice, or approval of discrimination (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002).

There is evidence that anti-Roma prejudice is expressed in overt and explicit ways in public discourse, in the media, in policy decisions, and in institutional practices all over Europe (Kertesi & Kézdi, 2011; Podolinská & Hrustič, 2015; Kroon, Kluknavská, Vliegenthart, & Boomgaarden, 2016; Vidra & Fox, 2014). Numerous studies used measures of overt expressions of prejudice to tap into the issue. Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, and Cotterill (2015) found that a blatant dehumanization scale was a valid measure of anti-Roma prejudice, and predicted discriminatory behavioral tendencies beyond more subtle prejudice measures. Most research on anti-Roma attitudes has relied on items reflecting explicitly negative statements about criminality and laziness (e.g., the anti-Roma attitude scale created by Enyedi, Fábrián, and Sik, 2004 is the most cited measure of anti-Roma prejudice in Hungary).

Related to the normative context that encourages rather than discourages the expression of hostility toward Roma people, the conditions for intergroup contact between non-Roma and Roma people are suboptimal from the perspective of prejudice reduction (as described by Allport, 1954). According to Reicher (2012), positive intergroup contact is often the consequence of societal changes brought about by disadvantaged groups through social competition, rather than the dominant group's intentions for change. Therefore, the positive effect of intergroup contact is unlikely to occur in the absence of strong social movements, without legal and institutional support, and in a context where the multiculturalist ideal is either non-existent or it does not apply to Roma people (Kende, Tropp, & Lantos, 2017; Láštiová & Findor, 2016; Mahoney, 2011; Podolinská & Hrustič, 2015). Consequently, intergroup contact between non-Roma and Roma people is likely to lead to negative rather than positive experiences (Kriglerová & Kadlečková, 2009). Although Váradi (2014) and Orosz et al., 2016 Orosz, Bánki, Bóthe, Tóth-Király, and Tropp (2016) provided empirical evidence for the positive generalized effect of contact, their studies used special types of contact situations (existing intergroup friendships and trained minority participants respectively). Correlational studies report a negative association between contact frequency and prejudice, and point out that anti-Roma prejudice is higher in areas with a higher Roma population (see, e.g., Todosijevic & Enyedi 2002).

The negative effect of intergroup contact may also be related to threat based on realistic conflict (the connection between threat and conflict is described by the integrated threat theory by Stephan and Stephan (2000). A higher concentration of Roma in particular geographical locations often coincides with higher unemployment and poverty rates, resulting in conflicts based on limited available resources (Mušinka, Škobla, Hurrle, Matlovičová, & Kling, 2014). Commonly held stereotypes reinforce the idea that Roma people are a threat to society. Loveland and Popescu (2016) argue that social distance with Roma people is dependent on the institutional and individual adoption of the so called “Gypsy Threat Narrative” portraying Roma people as a danger and burden to society.

Pettigrew, Wagner, and Christ (2010) list the macro factors – increase in size, multiple distinguishing characteristics, and leading politicians endorsing anti-outgroup sentiments – that contribute to increased threat levels for high contact groups, and to reduced chances of generalizable experiences of positive contact. They suggest that the degree of segregation and the perceived size of the outgroup determine whether contact with a large minority group leads to positive or negative outcomes. Roma people are often subject to the combined influence of forming relatively large, but spatially segregated communities (Kligman, 2001; Rusnáková & Rochovská, 2014). Furthermore, the unclear size of the Roma population may contribute to this effect. Census data based on self-identification tends to underestimate for fear of ethnic registration, while politicians and the media tend to overestimate the number in order to exaggerate the problem and fear (Clark, 1998). In sum, quality of contact may be a more accurate predictor of anti-Roma prejudice than contact frequency (Hewstone et al., 2008; Paolini et al., 2012).

Finally, although Roma people are a culturally and linguistically diverse group (Kemény & Janky, 2006), majority societies disregard the inner variability and the dynamic nature of Roma cultures (Stewart, 2013). Cultural stereotypes either folklorize them by emphasizing traditional culture, or depict them through cultural deficits: the culture of poverty or being uncivilized (Weinerová,

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