



# Stereotyping Roma people in Italy: IRT models for ambivalent prejudice measurement



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## ABSTRACT

'Gypsy' is a name that conjures up a wide variety of images in peoples' minds. Romanticised for their freedom or reviled for their antisocial behaviour, Roma people have in turns been the subject of both exotic myth and virulent prejudice. Roma are depicted as romantic or criminal outsiders: anything from thieves to talented and artistic people. Exploiting the potentiality of Item Response Theory models, this study aims to assess the level of consolidation of positive and negative stereotypes on Roma people in Italy. In addition, we investigate how socio-demographic covariates affect the degree of acceptance of a clichéd depiction of Roma. Results suggest that images and representations of the 'Gypsies', which confirm a distinction between nature and culture, persist in our culture. On the one hand, Roma are perceived as 'free' from societal constraints (nature); on the other hand, they are portrayed as criminals and untruthful, relational qualities that arise in a societal organised condition (culture). This distinction continues to be misused to delegitimise minority groups, especially Roma.

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## 1. Introduction

European Union (EU) institutions adopt the term 'Roma' as an umbrella term to include groups of people who share more or less similar cultural characteristics, such as the Roma, Sinti, Travellers, Ashkali, Manush, Jenische, Kaldaresh and Kalé. Throughout their history in Europe, the Roma people have generally faced many obstacles to their integration into mainstream society. The reasons for this are complex, but it is clear that ethnic discrimination of Roma by non-Roma has been an important factor (Erio, 2013). As pointed out by Nicolae (2007), anti-Tsiganism, anti-Gypsyism, and Romaphobia essentially mean the same thing: "... a very specific form of racism, an ideology of racial superiority, a form of dehumanisation and of institutionalised racism. Anti-Gypsyism is used to justify and perpetrate the exclusion and supposed inferiority of Roma and is based on historical persecution and negative stereotypes". Prejudices against the Roma are so deeply rooted in European culture that clichés are often not conceived as such and accepted instead as fact. Stereotypes typically take a probabilistic, non-categorical form and rely on local, contextually circumscribed, understandings of group life in order to accomplish stereotyping 'by implication'. The negative behaviour of one individual tends to be automatically applied

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to all 'Gypsies' and is attributed to Romani culture instead of to the individual (Erio, 2012). The stereotypes, that underlie common sense, serve as the unspoken backcloth to banal forms of interaction, invoking pejorative images of others without articulating them explicitly (Dixon & Levine, 2012). A good examples of this is the views on Roma people, characterised as agitated, passive, unattractive and bad, a sort of 'natural traits'; this findings confirm once again that an anti-Roma prejudicial vision is ancestral and may function as a common marker for cultural identity (Fontanella, Villano, & Di Donato, 2016; Pérez, Chulvi, & Alonso, 2001).

Chulvi and Pérez (2003), in their studies on the social representations of 'Gypsies', found that the typical traits assigned to Gypsies suggested their having an essence different from that of humans, being represented as antisocial nomads with a questionable morality and a preference for isolation within a self-enclosed universe beyond the realm of the human species. Along the same lines, Marcu and Chrysochoou (2005) found that more natural than cultural characteristics were assigned to the Gypsies (*outgroup*) than to the British (*ingroup*). In the nature/culture debate in Western society, nature is considered the primitive condition before human society (Williams, 1985), and culture begins at the point at which human beings surpass their natural inheritance and where the wild is domesticated (Strathern, 1980). In this perspective, a Gypsy is considered a wild, noisy and dirty being who reacts instinctively in an aggressive and unsophisticated manner, lives in an aggregate group and passively adapts to the situations (Marcu & Chrysochoou, 2005). This representation characterises the primitive status of nature, in terms of being unable to control supposedly biological determined traits. In this sense, the Roma people represent not only an outgroup, but an outsider in the social map of human identity (*ontologisation*). Haslam and Loughnan (2014) suggest that groups that are denied human nature are likely to be overlooked, distanced, objectified and treated instrumentally.

As for the description of Roma as people who do not want to settle in one place, the 'nomad' theory is often used to provide a form of cultural legitimation for excluding and marginalising the 'Gypsies' (Sigona, 2005). This commonplace is used not only to segregate the Roma people, but also to reinforce the popular idea that they are not citizens of the country they are living in, and that they do not belong to it. In Italy, the label *nomad* is applied generally to the whole of the Roma and Sinti population, without considering whether they are Italian citizens or foreigners, travellers or sedentary people, war refugees or migrants. The stereotype of nomadism is a powerful discursive frame, that persists at the core of contemporary anti-Gypsyism, and is linked to a discourse that imagines the entire Roma community as "involved in criminal activities, irreverent towards religion, harbouring sinister magical powers and primitive, as evidenced in promiscuity, dancing and baby-snatching" (Woodcock, 2010).

Although the prejudice on Roma people is overwhelmingly negative, traditional, historically rooted, 'romanticised' stereotypes are also widely shared. "The romantic image of Roma includes such elements as musical and dancing talent, capability of passionate love and other strong emotions, spontaneity, free and spiritual character, magical relatedness to nature, ability to enjoy themselves, etc." (Cahn, 2002). 'Gypsies' are often associated with the cliché of the 'children of the wind'. Nicolae (2007) includes those attitudes in the dehumanisation process, which is pivotal to anti-Gypsyism and leads to seeing Roma as a subhuman group closer to the animal realm than the human realm: "Even those rare cases of seemingly sympathetic portrayals of Roma seem to depict Roma as somehow not fully human, at best childlike. Roma are in the best cases described as free-spirited, carefree, happy, and naturally graceful. All these characteristics are frequently used to describe animals".

According to Puskás-Bajkó (2014), the wildness/savageness and freedom stereotypes refer to the hard-to-civilise spontaneities of the Gypsy individual bodies and to the essential freedom of the Gypsy social body: "[...] the metaphors describing the alterity of a (non-European, non-civilised, non-adhering to the norms of modern society) way of living always resort to corporeality: whether envisaged as an undisciplined individual body [...] or as an uncontrollable social body [...], the fictional portrait of the Roma people [...] seems to put forth, with both repulsion and fascination, the idea that Roma people experience their bodies in a different way than the civilised man, whose manners and norms of coexistence remain unknown to these inherently free savages."

As a consequence of both the negative and the positive traits ascribed to the Roma people, they are considered incapable of functioning in a modern society (Marinero, 2009). From this perspective, stereotypes on Roma people appear to serve a system justification function, allowing to explain and rationalise social arrangements by making them legitimate and natural. According to system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), stereotypes and other social judgments serve to maintain ideological support for the prevailing social system by justifying and rationalising inequality.

In this paper we analyse the ambivalent attitude towards Roma people, who, as stated by Kligman (2001), "[...] are simultaneously among history's most romanticized and reviled of peoples." Given the responses to a stereotype scale, collected by means of a web survey, we exploit the potentiality of Item Response theory models to investigate both the dimensionality of the stereotypical view of the Roma people and the extent to which the chosen stereotypes display a diversified level of consolidation and play a different role in shaping the prejudice intensity. Item response theory (IRT) is based on stochastic models for the responses of persons to items, where the influence of items and persons on the responses are modelled by disjunct sets of parameters (de Ayala, 2009). In our analysis, we hypothesise that the degree of acquiescence to the clichéd views depends on both some socio-demographic features and the respondents' political orientation.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 illustrates the research materials. In particular, in this section we better clarify the aims of the study, the procedure and the sample composition. The approach adopted in the analysis is described in Section 3, where we focus on the IRT modelling approach. The issue of the Roma stereotype scale dimensionality is investigated in Section 4. In Section 5, after a brief review of the IRT adopted model, we provide the main findings in terms of the degree of consolidation and endorsement of the stereotypes. Section 6 presents an analysis of the

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