



# Serbian adolescents' Romaphobia and their acculturation orientations towards the Roma minority<sup>☆</sup>

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received in revised form 1 November 2010

Accepted 23 November 2010

### Keywords:

Romaphobia

Acculturation expectations

Perceived threat

Serbia

Adolescents

## ABSTRACT

This study examines whether and to what extent perceived threat mediates the relationship between expectations towards the Roma acculturation and anti-Roma attitudes. A model was tested using structural equation modeling. The sample consisted of 687 Serbian adolescents (mean age 17), of which 53% were females. In a survey-based study, we assessed participants' acculturation expectations, their feelings towards the Roma, and their perception of economic and symbolic threat. The results provide support for the expected interrelationships between the constructs: the endorsement of integrative acculturation expectations was negatively associated with perceived threat and Romaphobia, whereas the preferences for assimilation, segregation, or marginalization were associated with more perceived threat, and more Romaphobia. Moreover, the relationships between acculturation expectations and Romaphobia were partially (in case of integration and marginalization) and fully (in case of assimilation and segregation) mediated by perceived threat. The implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

This study deals with anti-Roma prejudice in Serbia. Empirical research points to the widespread social exclusion of long-established Roma communities in their home countries, one of which is Serbia (Guy, 2001; Prieto-Flores, 2006; Sigona, 2005). Notwithstanding their uninterrupted presence in Serbia for almost seven centuries, the Roma are not considered part of the host society, and are subjected to negative prejudice, discrimination, low standards of living, and residential segregation (Antic, 2005; Jaksic, 2002). Being a low status group, this minority lacks the social means, like school careers, access to news media and bank loans, to participate and integrate into mainstream society (Postma, 1996). Moreover, empirical evidence indicates that status change, i.e. upward mobility of individual Roma does not reflect on the position of Roma as a group (Prieto-Flores, 2006). On the contrary, individual status change (due to educational attainment or entrepreneurship) typically goes hand in hand with assimilation into the dominant society and breaking the ties with the Roma culture (Barany, 2001; Koulisch, 2005).

Past research has shown that power advantages enable dominant group members to impose acculturation strategies on the members of subordinate groups, supposedly to protect the mainstream or majority host culture and the wellbeing of its members (cf. Bourhis, Barrette, El-Geledi, & Schmidt, 2009). Stephan and Stephan (1996) demonstrated that perceived cultural discrepancies and status differences between the groups lead to the perception of subordinate group members as persons who threaten national material (i.e. realistic threat) and immaterial resources (i.e. symbolic threat). Past research

<sup>☆</sup> The paper was reviewed and accepted by the prior Editor-in-Chief, Dan Landis.

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has shown that perceived threat is an important predictor of outgroup prejudice (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006, for a review). Moreover, it was found that people who were less accepting of minorities' acculturation entailing a preference for maintaining the minorities' heritage culture, or social participation in the dominant culture also perceived more intergroup threat (e.g., Piontkowski, Florack, Hoelker, & Obdrzalek, 2000; Piontkowski, Rohmann, & Florack, 2002). In contrast, people who endorsed integrationist attitudes towards outgroups and multiculturalism were found less threatened and less prejudiced towards culturally distinct minorities (Gonzalez, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008). The current study investigated if perceived threat mediates the relationships between expectations towards the Roma acculturation and anti-Roma attitudes among Serbian adolescents.

### 1.1. Acculturation expectations

Acculturation refers to intercultural interactions and mutual influences between dominant and subordinate groups (Berry, 1999, 2003). Berry's model of acculturation (Berry, 2003) proposes the relative preference for maintenance of the own ethnic culture and the relative preference for relationships with other groups, as the main criteria for a group's socio-cultural adaptation. Hence, four distinct acculturation attitudes or behavioral strategies are distinguished, i.e. integration (yes to both cultural maintenance and interethnic contact), assimilation (yes to interethnic contact, no to cultural maintenance), segregation or separation (yes to cultural maintenance, no to intercultural contact) and marginalization or exclusion (no to both cultural maintenance and intercultural contact).

Earlier research mainly dealt with the psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of minority (mostly immigrant) groups. It was found that not only one's ingroup identity and desire for intergroup contact account for intergroup processes, but also the willingness of the receiving society to welcome and accept the newcomers. In particular, discrimination and negative prejudice were found to be related with the acculturation of subordinate groups (e.g. Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, Horenczyk, & Schmitz, 2003).

Moreover, past research indicated that by virtue of power advantages, the dominant group members may have relative control over minorities' acculturation (Bourhis et al., 2009). According to interactive acculturation models (Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, & Senecal, 1997; Piontkowski et al., 2002), status differences between the subordinate and dominant group may result in different, even conflicting expectations regarding the acculturation processes (Rohmann, Florack, & Piontkowski, 2006). The members of subordinate groups are typically interested in cultural maintenance, and often favor integration which grants them space for both contact with nationals and maintenance of their own heritage culture (Bourhis et al., 2009; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2003; Zick, Wagner, Dick, & Petzel, 2001). In contrast, the members of national groups may be concerned with the prospects of sharing national resources with subordinate groups; hence their acculturation expectations may reflect a desire to reject a 'foreign' culture and/or to limit intercultural relationships with "devalued" subordinate groups (Florack, Piontkowski, Rohmann, Balzer, & Perzig, 2003; Montreuil & Bourhis, 2004; Piontkowski et al., 2000).

Recent surveys show that nine out of ten Roma seek to work with dominant group members and over 90% of the Roma want their children to befriend children of the majority (United Nations Development Program, 2003). It was found that the majority of the Roma seek to "integrate but not assimilate", i.e. to actively participate in their society, while maintaining their heritage culture and ethnic affiliations (Jaksic, 2002). According to the interactive acculturation model (Bourhis et al., 2009) the intergroup processes should be harmonious when both host and subordinate group members show a clear preference for integration (Bourhis et al., 2009; Piontkowski et al., 2002). Although the present study did not explicitly deal with this mutuality in acculturation preferences between Roma and the Serbian nationals, we assume, on the ground of the earlier research, that for part of the subjects participating in the study the aforementioned mutuality is their reality. We hold that for these nationals their integration preference is accompanied by low levels of perceived threat and by generally positive emotions towards the Roma minority. By contrast, we expect nationals who endorse assimilation, segregation or exclusion to be characterized by higher levels of perceived threat and Romaphobia (Barrette, Bourhis, Personnaz, & Personnaz, 2004; Bourhis et al., 2009; Wimmer, 2004).

### 1.2. Perceived threat

Threat theorists argue that perceived threat may be the key to understanding negative out-group attitudes (Bobo, 1999; Sherif, 1966; Stephan & Stephan, 1996, 2000). Perceived threat reflects the belief that intergroup relationships have detrimental outcomes for ingroup members (Stephan et al., 2002; Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Schwarzwald, & Tur-Kaspa, 1998). The present study focuses on the apperception of personally experienced economic and symbolic threat. Perceived economic threat concerns inter-group competition for scarce resources such as jobs and housing (Sherif, 1966). Symbolic threat is about the worldviews of a group, which is assumingly threatened by out-group members with distinct morals, norms, and values (Sears, 1988).

Cross cultural research suggests that different types of threat play a different role in different inter-group settings, depending on previous inter-group relationships, the socio-economic context, and the particular out-group that is dealt with (cf. Riek et al., 2006). This is why we will first present here an abridged version of the history of the relationship between the Roma and the Serbian majority. In former Yugoslavia (1943–1992), the integration of Roma into the mainstream society was actively promoted within the state-governed policy of multiculturalism (Fraser, 1992). This meant that there was room for the preservation of the language and culture of the Roma, but also that there were efforts towards equal access to education,

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