

Roma Families and Education in a Changing Era: The internal contradictions of the rationale of three Roma mothers concerning their children's education.

Tonia Papadopoulou, P.H.D. student in University of Peloponnese

Abstract

In contemporary times the rapid changes occurring in political, social, economic and ideological terms, impose flexibility and demand the adoption of individual mobility strategies not as an alternative choice of action but as the one and only way of survival in the global society. People who face difficulties in keeping up with these transformations and responding to their demands are coming from social groups based on principles of mechanical solidarity where the social cohesion and the unity of the group overcomes the individual needs of its members.

Roma people, as members of such communities, are expected to experience major contraventions, as they will be forced to choose between the particularities of their nomadic lifestyle and the assimilation with the dominant cultural model. The strategies that Roma will have to apply in the purpose of their assimilation may be in conflict with basic norms of their community.

The following essay is based on the interviews of three Roma mothers regarding the education of their children. The purpose of this study is to show the contradiction of their rationale and of the strategies that they adopt. Although these mothers are aware of the consequences of these global shifts in economy and society, as well as the importance of education and specialization and their close ties to the labor market, they seem to be unwilling or unready to act according to the demands of our era as far as their children's education is concerned and their expectations of it. These interviews reveal their internal contradictions, their anxiety and the obligation to comply with the norms of their community.

Introduction

Globalization is the synonym of speed in every aspect of our social or individual life, and in this sense rapid changes have taken place in every field, as well as each human individual has to keep up with them – not only with the changes but also with the speed – and be prepared for the greatest alterations. According to what social theorists underpin and what anyone can observe, during the last three decades, ideological constructs and dogmas, economic and political theories and practices, state borders and ethnic or racial gaps, social and individual identities as well as cultural forms are in flux (Giddens 1990; Giddens 1991; Harvey 2004; Tsoukalas 2010). In the attempt of everybody to deal with these rapid shifts of the contemporary world, people carry on with their personal lives much as they always did, but try to keep pace with the social transformations as well.

In contrast to the pre-industrial era and the dominance of the principles of local communities over the individual choices for purposes of mechanical solidarity, and also contrary to the organic solidarity, which took place after the Industrial Revolution and enforced societies over communities and the social orders over the local morals (Durkheim 1893; Tönnies 1974; Lukes 1985), the global changes of our era demand from individuals flexibility and mobility due to the hard competition in every aspect of human activities. It is what Giddens describes with the following words: *“In the settings of modernity, the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change”* (Giddens 1991; 33).

No matter how appealing these tremendous shifts seem to be, the risk and the insecurity included within cannot be underestimated, contrary to older communities, where their mechanical solidarity ensured their social cohesion by strict control of their members, whom on the other hand provided with support and protection. So, it is questionable whether strategies like these are likely to find acceptance and implementation by members of social groups structured within the principles of mechanical solidarity.

Typical examples of such groups are the Roma communities.

In terms of modernity, they are expected to experience major contraventions as they are forced to choose between traditional values and personal aspirations, nomadic lifestyle and self mobility, the solidarity of their Roma community and the dominant cultural model of the modern world. Devi mentions how changes in global society affect Roma communities: *“They have turned into semi-traditional, semi-modern or semi-settled communities but nevertheless remain unsettled as semi-nomads. In each of these cases the ways in which changes take place are partly influenced by historical traditions or remnant cultural features. This leads to social stratifications and the emergence of developed groups within their own communities, class –caste differences, and replacement of old cultures by new ones. Such differences are noticed only when they rapidly and seriously disrupt the nature of the community or its relation to the outside world”* (Devi 1996: 18).

However as far as education is concerned, as Kyuchukov underpins observing Roma in Bulgaria, traditional Roma families prefer to maintain the illiteracy of their daughters, stop them from school at the age of 12 -13 and prepare them for their future marital life, so as not to risk the honor of their family in the community.

“Young Roma women who pursue their studies into higher education run the risk of no longer being accepted by traditional communities [...] Thus, young Roma women are faced with a grave dilemma from a very early age; to stay in their communities, follow the strong tradition regarding their virginity and accept great restraints put on their freedoms, or break with the tradition, fight their families and live their villages to pursue their educational aspirations” (Kyuchukov 2011: 97-98).

The purpose of this paper is to show that in modern time members of traditional communities, such as the Roma, not only face difficulties to conform and keep up with the transformations of global society, but also confusion and anxiety at the simultaneous obligation to comply with the norms and customs of their community. Thus their adopted attitudes, practices and strategies, even their worldview and atomism reveal intense internal conflict and contradictions. This essay will try to prove it by using the paradigm of education.

Literature Review

Although in recent years there has been large research activity in Greece on issues related with the Roma community and especially their relation to education, researches examining the views of Roma parents concerning this issue are very limited. But as Daskalaki comments in a recently published article, these surveys examine the issues of Roma education in relation with the root causes of their school dropout and its results and less with the meaning that Roma give to education and the practices that they follow concerning that (Daskalaki 2010).

The first relevant ethnographic research was held in 1983 by Nitsa Loule-Theodoraki in the Roma residents of Agia Varvara and presented the characteristics of Roma lifestyle in a modern urban environment (Loule –Theodoraki 1983). A more extended research in the best-known Roma camps of the greek territory was published in 1991. This research examined and presented the female portrait in the Roma community (Pavli – Korre, Spanouli, Kaloudi 1991).

In 1990 and on behalf of the General Secretariat of Adult Education an extended research took place recording the habits and lifestyle of the residents of two Roma communities in Agia Barbara and in Kato Achaia, i.e. in an urban and in a rural Roma

settlement (Sideri, Pavli-Korre 1990). In 1998 Anna Lydaki presented the results of her ethnographic research in the Roma residents of Agia Barbara and in 2000 the results of a similar study in the Roma residents of Ano Liosia. Both researches were based on participant observations and life histories of the Roma subjects of her surveys (Lydaki 1998, 2000).

In 2002, a collective volume of the Greek Ethnological Company presented the results of a survey that had been made by Kathryn Kozaitis. This survey was based on interviews of Roma residents of Agia Varvara and was related with the construction of their identity in terms of modernity (Kozaitis 2002). The most recent research was performed by Mitakidou and Tressou and published in 2007. It is based on the interviews of two Roma mothers concerning their children's educational attainment and the problems and difficulties that they face (Mitakidou, Tressou 2007).

Methodology

This essay examines the cases of three Roma young women who were interviewed in terms of a pilot study for my PHD research. These three women were habitants of the same rural environment¹, married with children, and the social and economic status of their families classifies them among the top Roma families of their community. These interviews were held in the winter of 2010 and gave me the opportunity to discuss with them about the way they face changes in the modern world and what they expect of their children's education. Even though my initial intention was to take three semi-structured interviews according to the research plan I had made, I finally decided that a friendly discussion following a main structure focused on some basic directives that I had planned, would be more effective and fruitful.

These were:

- Personal information.
- Their personal relation to education and school and their family and friends' respectively.
- The importance of education in their life, in their children's life, and in the Roma community in general.
- The educational expectations from their children in relation to their gender.

- The educational decision- making of their family.

The interviews lasted approximately for one hour and a half and were taken at a convenient place and time for the subjects of the research. For the data collection of these interviews I used a tape recorder.

Findings

For the analysis of the interview transcripts I was based on the interview plan that I followed and its directives, but while reading and re-reading the interviews I spotted some points that gave me clues about a strange contravention which these three women personally faced.

Case 1

- *Personal information*

The first woman was 26 years old, married for over ten years and a mother of four children. She shares the same house with her parents-in-law and for that reason she wanted us to meet in the house of her best friend. During the interview she revealed with a sense of complaint that this was her second marriage. Her first one was when she was 16 years old and eloped with the young man she was in love with. The same thing also happened to her current husband as he was also married before to the young woman that he loved. But, as she described, their families divorced them and forced them to get married to each other because they wanted the newly-weds to live near them as to be more easily controlled. *“We had some problems in the beginning, because pre-arranged marriages always face some problems, but as time goes by living with those persons, we love them”*.

When I asked her why she got married so young she replied that this is the ordinary practice: *“I watched my other friends getting married, we heard our mothers who got married very young, our grandmothers did the same... we live in this style, we live in this way, we can't change it...”*.

And then she told me the story of her aunt, her father's sister, who at a very young age went against the customs of their community, refused to marry, left her house, became

a singer, got married in Canada, returned to her village with her husband and daughter after more than ten years, but it was very difficult for her family to accept her back. Even now in their community she and her daughter are faced with prejudice. Despite this, subject 1 admires them both and especially her cousin, who is a girl of almost the same age (25), but she has studied economics in the university and currently works as an accountant in a company, living alone and independent in a flat that she rents in Patras. As she finally commented with a sense of bitterness about her own life without hiding her admiration for her aunt and her cousin: “*They are totally different. They have lived their life*”.

- *Her personal relation to education and school and her family's and friends' one.*

She stopped school when she finished her primary education, around the age of 12. All her friends and relatives used to stop school at about the same age those days. She wasn't a good student and she didn't love school, even though now she admits that she would like to have a further education in order to help her husband with his daily professional requirements. She supposes that if she had continued her education or had an academic degree, her community would have made fun of her. She told me that nobody in their community has any further education and she underpinned this point with the phrase “*We are normal*”.

- *The importance of education in her life, in her children's life, and in the Roma community.*

Although she admits the practical value of education in the demands of daily life and especially the professional requirements, she doesn't believe that education is something extremely important. As she mentions, it is of the utmost importance for a member of the Roma society to be a good daughter or son, a decent husband or wife, mature and responsible father or mother, with good manners and mostly a hard worker. “*To be a worthy landlord (noikokyris) in his home and to manage some things by himself in a very young age is something that helps our people to respect him mostly*”. That's the way to gain respect in their community, and she believes that in the same way they will gain the respect of the non – Roma too, if a Roma person is honest and trustworthy. She repeated a lot of times that it's also important for a Roma

man to have social or business relations with non –Roma people of high professional and social status (e.g. a bank manager, or a lawyer). But that does not apply to Roma women.

- *Her educational expectations of her children in relation to their gender.*

She has not the same expectations of her boys and girls. She is mostly interested in her sons' education, but only the basic education that is considered sufficient enough to run a company like the one that her husband owns and meet the demands of modern times. She is not interested in any further education for her sons, but she is not going to stop them if they show such an intention. She does not care about degrees or any other certification of knowledge. She is more interested in the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills (e.g. use of computers, foreign languages).

On the other hand and according to her opinion girls should stop school at the age of 12 and then stay at home with their mothers and grandmothers who will teach them the art of housekeeping. That's more useful for them as in a few years they will get married and take up the responsibilities of their own families. In the question why her daughters wouldn't continue their education so as to have the possibility of a different life, she was absolutely negative but her words were full of contradictions.

“That's why parents should not let girls pass the age of 15 and marry after their 16 or 17, because then they have grown up and have different needs... But when a girl is young enough, her parents can lead her and restructure the mind of the kid (because she's a kid yet) and the kid does what we do.... When we bring them up, what we should do with them? We realize that when we were at their age, we also wanted to study, to have our own job, to live in a different way but...”

And a few moments later she said: *“Maybe I'm not happy with my life, because I have already four children and I'm 26 and I feel exhausted, and I feel like being 40, I haven't lived my life as I wanted to, at least a bit more relaxed... But I wouldn't want my daughter to continue with school, to grow up first and then decide to get married, because then my daughter will not marry with a Roma. She may get married to one of yours, she may leave...”*

Case 2

- *Personal information*

The second woman was 26 years old, married with three children, a baby boy and two girls of school age. She got married at the age of 18 - old enough for a Roma girl - and that's why she rushed to explain that it was her choice to marry in that age. Because as she had already told me , getting married after the age of 15 – 16 means that the girl is ugly or has some other – serious – default (usually not being a virgin). They lived at the house of her parents-in-law, but when the baby becomes a bit older, they would move to their new house in Crete, where the new store of her husband is. Living with her parents-in-law is something which is considered very normal from her, as her husband is their only son and in their community it is a kind of obligation for an only son to look after his parents and to inherit his parent's job.

- *Her personal relation to education and school and her family's and friends' one.*

She began her education in a private school in Patras, when the job of her father was there. At that time she was very excited at her school, her teachers, her schoolmates and the lessons that she attended. Even though she never hid her racial identity, she was equally accepted and estimated by everyone in that school. She changed school after the first three school years, when her father could not afford the school fees and when his job was transferred to Kato Achaia, he had no reason to wake his daughter up each morning and take her to a private school 30km away from their place of living.

In her new public school teachers were not so supportive and helpful. Her school performance got worse and finally she left school at the age of 13, after completing the first grade of Gymnasium. She was the only girl in her time, who had reached that educational level. *“My community accused me...They called me Gadgeⁱⁱ...”*.

Now she insists that it is better for a girl to complete her education by finishing primary school and then staying at home for two or three years before getting married and devoting herself to her husband and her family. *“That's why any further education is not necessary, as it will give her nothing. She won't travel abroad, she will never use the English language...”*.

- *The importance of education in her life, in her children's life, and in the Roma community.*

Despite all these, she realizes the importance of education and that life nowadays is so demanding that one can meet these demands only via the necessary educational efforts and the acquisition of specific skills. On the other hand she believes that the most important role of education is the transmission of notions of acceptable social behavior. The school can teach girls how to be “*fair ladies*”. On the other hand the boys can learn at school mathematics, computing and foreign languages that are useful for their commercial occupations which are extended to Europe and China. “...*They should know all these so as not to be cheated by others who may have the intention to trick them in their job, to take advantage of them*”.

- *The educational expectations from her children in relation to their gender.*

Similar to the woman of case 1, she has not the same educational expectations from her son and from her daughter. Even though she points out that for someone (man or woman) who wants to succeed socially education is the only way, she doesn't want her girls to go any further than primary education. “*We have a reason. We don't send them further, because we try to stay together. Our community is small, our circle is closed. We don't want them falling in love somewhere else, staying there, growing up there. That's why we use to marry our children young enough, because we want them to be financially independent and capable of helping their husbands with their jobs – I like watching my daughters work (of course always with their husbands). Let them go till first or second grade of Gymnasium. After that I will stop them myself*”.

For her boy her expectations are totally different. “*For my son I'd like something further. If I want them (meaning her daughters) at point 10, I want my son to reach point 20. If the limit point is 100, I want my son to reach 100, and let my girls up to 80. There may not be a huge difference between them, but even 20 is a difference and it wouldn't bother me.*” When I asked why she said so, she told me that she would prefer this difference to be greater and more obvious for the sake of her son, and explain her discrimination: “*First of all for himself. He will fight for his family, to feed them, to bring them up, to... and for social recognition. When a woman gives birth to her children, she will have a great family and she will recede herself to other things.*”

She wouldn't be able to take care of a large family and also work and help her husband. For us it's clear that dad is for the professional task".

Case 3

- Personal information

The third woman was 27 years old, married with two sons. Her husband was a merchant and he was away most time in Greece or abroad. At that moment he was in China for over a month. She got married at the age of 15 with a boy two years younger than her. At the beginning of our discussion and at the end she told me off-the-record that she was very anxious about getting older and being married to a younger man, and she asked me to give her advice to face this neurosis. Then she admitted that the actual base of her problems is because she doesn't work and she is obliged to stay home all day long due to the fear of negative social judgments and criticism from her community. She complains about her life: *"If I worked like all the other women of the rest of the world... I wouldn't mind, because I would communicate with others. But now staying closed here all day, it's very tiring. Especially if you don't have somebody to say a word with... Your brain gets numb."*

- Her personal relation to education and school and her family's and friends' one.

She was a good student. She liked school. Her father had showed great enthusiasm about his children's education and had tried to take advance of any educational possibility that the state offered to Roma students, like the child student card for Travelersⁱⁱⁱ. Her brother wasn't interested and that's why her father hired a private teacher to offer him some tuition but it was meaningless. On the other hand her interest in school was great. She attended till the first grade of Gymnasium and then stopped. Her teachers tried to persuade her to continue. She wanted so. *"I always had it in my mind as a dream that I would continue, that I would study, I would become... I told my father "I'm not getting married, I won't do that stuff... ""* When I asked her why she didn't continue at last, she exclaimed with bitterness that it is established in their community to marry when they are young. *"It was that "must"... You must do*

so... must... must... must... and a "must" against my dream made me stop there with school. That's my story with school".

Her husband had a same story as far as his education is concerned. Good student, married young though. As she described to me, that's the usual story of all the Roma of her age.

- *The importance of education in her life, in her children's life, and in the Roma community.*

She realizes the significance and the need of education in modern times. Her husband's journeys around the world, their communication and contacts with the non – Roma society, and of course T.V. and the other media made them realize so and ask for more and more education for their children. She told me that they share the same educational views with some other Roma families and parents, but not with the majority of Roma and it is something that depends on the financial ability of any family to invest time and money in its children's education.

But she was very optimistic about that. She told me that modernity had brought great changes in the Roma life considering their views and practices. They are asking for a better life with a quality that only education can offer and in this respect they don't have many children. The recipe of her family for success is "*... a few children, very much education and better life*".

Many of young Roma couples share the same point of view and ask for a better life out of the norms and control of their narrow-minded community. Education is the way her sons can achieve that. "*If my son learns a few things, and study whatever he decides, it won't help the rest of the Roma community, it won't make the Roma community any difference. He will gain something for himself, he will manage to get more out of the community and he will have another kind of life... He will have relations with other people...*".

Despite all these, during the interview she mentioned many times how important is the Roma community's opinion and recognition for her family or the way that the Roma community will comment on their choices. "*We live a lot with that. We don't want to be commented negatively*".

- *The educational expectations from her children in relation with their gender.*

She wants both her sons to have the best possible education by attending all educational levels, and by having private lessons in foreign languages or computing. She told me that she would like them and especially her younger son, who shows to be mostly keen on school to follow further education in a university and not continue their father's job without having enough educational qualifications.

However when the question came to marriage, she told me that she should marry her sons young enough and the sooner the better, in order to have the chance to choose the best available brides among families of high status in their community. When I asked her about the strategies that she had previously told me about her sons' education, she answered that in such a case she will help her married sons continue their studies and she will inspire and support her daughters-in-law continue their studies too.

Conclusions

In the previous pages, the cases of three modern young Roma mothers, members of high status families in their community were examined in order to show how modernity and global changes have influenced the way that members of a traditional community perceive themselves and the practices that they adopt in order to keep up with the changing world. Using the example of education, they were asked to share their personal experiences and views concerning their education and the education of their children in a highly competitive world, where the non-skilled person cannot survive.

The given answers have marked great discrepancies not only in their views but also in the practices that they finally follow. Although they seemed to be aware of the importance of education in the practical issues of their daily domestic and professional life and despite their intentions for their children having a better education than them in order to be able to respond in a better way to the demands of the modern world, the values and the customs of their community are proved to be more influential and their need to keep up with their community more powerful. Because no matter how exhausting is the control of their community for them, and how compulsively frustrating the values and customs of their community for the

fulfillment of their dreams turn to be, their community gives them support, safety and the sense of togetherness that the modern liberal world does not.

Of course, we should not forget that the previous conclusions are the results of a case study and cannot be generalized. However they raise questions for further examination and research in depth as well as in a larger range.

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ⁱ Their community is placed in a village named Kato Achaia, almost 30km from Patras with a population over 6.500 residents and the Roma amount the 1/3 of this population. The Roma of Kato Achaia in their majority are permanent residents of this place that combines rural and semi-urban characteristics and they are occupied with the trade business. One of the main characteristics of the Roma community in Kato Achaia is that it is considered to be one of the most modernized, assimilated and rich Roma communities in Greece.

ⁱⁱ Gadge is the Roma word-name for Non-Roma persons.

ⁱⁱⁱ Child student card for Travelers was established by Decision of the Greek Ministry of Education in 1996. It is a convenient solution for Travelers' children to follow up their studies at school in the place their family moves to.