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Anti-Roma prejudice in Greece: A challenge for social work
Prejuicio contra los romaníes en Grecia: Un desafío para el trabajo social

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Abstract:

The Roma are one of the most marginalised and socially excluded groups in Greece. They face discrimination, barriers and social exclusion mainly as a result of anti-Roma stereotypes and prejudices formed throughout the centuries. The purpose of this research was to investigate attitudes and prejudices towards the Roma according to the views of education, health and social welfare professionals. The research used qualitative methods and in particular a semi-structured interview. The group of interviewees included twenty-three professionals working in various settings in the city of Athens. The research showed that welfare, health and education professionals, under the influence of dominant social attitudes, are likely to become vehicles of the same anti-Roma prejudices and negative attitudes held by the general population. The research results highlight the need to develop appropriate intervention measures designed to reduce the feeling of threat and change the negative anti-Roma attitudes of these professionals, by focusing on multicultural, critical and anti-oppressive approaches and adopting multicultural policies aimed at accepting diversity and fighting discrimination.

Keywords: Attitudes, prejudices, Roma, social work, Greece.

Resumen:

Los romaníes son uno de los grupos más marginados y socialmente excluidos de Grecia. La discriminación, las barreras y la exclusión social se deben principalmente a las opiniones estereotipadas y los prejuicios que se han configurado para ellos a lo largo de los años.

El objetivo de esta investigación fue investigar las actitudes y los prejuicios hacia los romaníes según los puntos de vista de los profesionales del bienestar, la salud y la educación. La encuesta se realizó con metodología cualitativa y, en particular, con entrevistas semiestructuradas. El grupo de entrevistados incluyó a treinta profesionales de bienestar social, salud y educación que trabajan en diferentes servicios en la ciudad de Atenas. Las investigaciones han demostrado que los profesionales del bienestar, la salud y la educa-

ción, bajo la influencia de actitudes sociales soberanas, pueden correr el riesgo de ser las mismas ideas preconcebidas y negativas hacia los romanies que la población general. Los resultados de la encuesta respaldan la necesidad de desarrollar intervenciones apropiadas para reducir la sensación de amenaza y cambio de las actitudes negativas de los profesionales de servicios hacia los romanies, centrándose en las intervenciones de enfoque multicultural, crítico y antirrepresivo y la adopción de políticas multiculturales, aceptación de la diversidad y combate discriminación.

Article info:

1. Introduction: The Roma people in Greece - Social exclusion and marginalisation

In Greece, the Roma people are one of the country's most underprivileged and marginalised social groups. They are subjected to social exclusion and most of them live on the margins of social integration (Greek Ministry of Labour and Social Security 2011).

Historically, the Roma are believed to have originated in the northern Indian subcontinent and to have entered the Byzantine Empire, and subsequently the Greek territory, in the 14th century. For many centuries they have lived in the region as "outsiders". It was not until the early 1970s that they were granted civil rights (Parthenis and Fragoulis 2016) and started to be seen as Greek citizens. To date, Roma population figures are subject to uncertainty and underestimation. The Roma people are invisible in national indicators. They are not counted in the census, as they are not officially recognised as a minority group, and as such they are not recorded on the national monitoring systems of the public authorities. However, a combination of relevant sources puts their number at approximately 265 000 individuals.

A series of studies suggest that, in Greece, an important number of Roma live in racially segregated ghetto-like dwellings, under inhuman conditions. In comparison to the general population, the Roma suffer from poorer health and increased mortality rates, and experience more barriers of access to healthcare services. Moreover, they face considerable challenges in accessing education, display high dropout rates, encounter difficulties in gaining access to the labour market, and are affected by absolute unemployment (Asimopoulos et al. 2019). According to the National Roma Strategy Framework of the Greek Ministry of Labour and Social Security (2011), stigmatisation, strong negative stereotypes and widespread prejudice prevailing in the Greek society are the most important factors leading to anti-Roma discrimination and social exclusion.

2. Stigma and prejudice towards Roma

Dudley (2000) linked stigma and prejudice to a lack of knowledge, to stereotypes or negative views attributed to a person or group of people when their characteristics or behaviours are viewed as different from or inferior to societal norms.

As regards the Roma people in particular, stigma and prejudice are linked to the fundamental elements of their collective identity, culture, lifestyle and choices. The negative social attitudes these evoke among the dominant social group lead the rest of society towards reactions of fear, avoidance of social interaction and social distance. This results in Roma isolation, social marginalisation, social exclusion and discrimination, and in a subculture of poverty (Cemlyn 2008).

Anti-Roma prejudices are observed in the field of social life, at both interpersonal and intergroup level, in public discourse, in the media, in policy decisions, and in institutional practices all over Europe (Kende et al. 2017). According to the Special Eurobarometer Report on Discrimination in the European Union (European Commission 2012), 40 % of the European citizens would not like to have Roma neighbours in their communities, 40 % would feel uncomfortable if their children had Roma schoolmates, while 75 % of the respondents agree that the Roma are a group of people at risk of discrimination. On a practical level, prejudices are a breeding ground for xenophobia and racism, and undermine social cohesion, peaceful coexistence and the safeguarding of human rights.

Stigma and prejudice towards the Roma people are observed across all EU countries; however they have been shown to vary depending on many factors. Prejudice is most acute in areas with a higher Roma concentration which increases intergroup anxiety, in areas affected by economic decline, poverty and high unemployment leading to conflicts over the available resources, as well as in areas dominated by an unstable threatened national identity coupled with a strong presence of nationalism (Kende et al. 2017). Anti-Roma prejudice is also expected to be higher within collectivist cultures, such as Greece, where individuals are self-defined in in-groups terms and are more likely to adopt the reference group rules, whereas different individuals or outsiders are mainly perceived as deviant (Papadopoulos et al. 2012).

In Greece, little research has been done on Roma stigmatisation and prejudice. In 2014, a survey conducted by Pew Research Centre in seven EU Member States showed that 53 % of the Greek population has negative attitudes towards the Roma people (Pew Research Centre, 2014). Also, a survey conducted by Asimopoulos et al (2019) has indicated that a significant part of the staff employed in the Greek public health sector tends to hold anti-Roma prejudices and stereotyped perceptions, which exert a negative influence on the way they treat the Roma whenever these people try to gain access to the necessary health services.

In the context of the deep economic crisis of 2010 and under the current socioe-conomic conditions of impoverishment of the Greek population, the investigation of anti-Roma prejudices is a matter of utmost importance. Firstly, because the numer-ous and serious consequences of the crisis have aggravated social inequalities and accelerated the social exclusion process, particularly affecting the most vulnerable social groups, such as the Roma people (Themelis 2015). Secondly, because the cri-sis itself and the neoliberal policies adopted have led to the rise of populist, nation-alist and xenophobic movements and the electoral empowerment of the neo-Nazi construct called "Chrysi Avgi", and as a result to the growth of racism (Vieten and Poynting 2016). The dynamics of this condition provide fertile ground for a particu-larly intense reproduction of anti-Roma stereotypes and prejudices, a rise of romanophobia and anti-gypsyism within the Greek society and a risk of Roma being further targeted as victims of exclusion and racism in social life.

3. Methodology

3.1. *Purpose and research questions*

The purpose of this research was an in-depth study, through qualitative methods, of the social attitudes and prejudices towards the Roma people according to the views of education, health and welfare professionals. The research was conducted in Athens, from January to March 2017.

In particular, the research tried to answer the following questions: What are the attitudes and prejudices towards the Roma people? How are these attitudes and prej-udices towards the Roma people formed? What impact do these have on Roma social inclusion?

3.2. *Sample – Participants*

In this qualitative research, sampling was purposive in order to collect data that enable an in-depth focus on the phenomenon under study. In particular, the group of interviewees, namely the respondents who participated in the research, included twenty-three education, health and social welfare professionals working in the city of Athens. Among them, nine were healthcare professionals, five were teachers and nine were municipal employees. As regards their field of work, there were nine social workers, one sociologist, one health visitor, two administrators, three nurses, two doctors, and five teachers. The group of respondents included fifteen women and eight men.

3.3. Research tool: Semi-structured interview

The data collection method used was a semi-structured interview. The interview guide included questions on the most common perceptions of the Roma and the way respondents feel when they get in touch with them. Respondents were also asked to evaluate the view that the Roma people are associated with delinquency and crime, to state which elements of Roma culture are acceptable and pleasant and which are inadmissible and unpleasant, and to describe the ways the Roma are portrayed in the media, the kinds of problems they face and possible solutions.

3.4. Ethical issues

The research was conducted on the basis of the principle of informed consent and voluntary participation. All respondents were informed that the information provided by them would be treated confidentially and their personal data and anonymity would be protected. Their consent was also secured for recording the interviews.

3.5. Analysis

Content analysis was the method selected to analyse the written data produced from the interviews. The objective of content analysis is to convert recorded raw phenomena into data which can be treated essentially in a scientific manner so that a body of knowledge may be built up.

In this study, the examination of the data at a first level was followed by the creation of an initial thematic and taxonomic system. These initial themes identified the concepts, the facts or situations as resulted and conveyed by the respondents. Consequently, these were grouped into categories providing the results of the study. In particular, the categories are as following: 1) Perceptions of the Roma, 2) The evaluative system for the Roma people, 3) The socially unacceptable behaviours of the Roma people, 4) Patterns of interpretation for the Roma people, 5) The role of socialisation in the development of prejudice, 6) The role of the media in the formation of prejudice, 7) Feelings towards the Roma people and hostility.

4. Results

4.1. Perceptions of the Roma

Respondents acknowledge that the wider society has developed negative anti-Roma perceptions, and admit they too share some of them. The set of characteristics

they use to portray the nature and qualities of the Roma people appear in common patterns of perception, thinking, speech and communication already shaped in the wider social field. These are indicators of social inclusion and ways to categorise and handle Roma position within the social space.

The representational model, around which revolves the individual, interpersonal and collective social codification of the Roma people within the wider society, defines them more or less as people to be avoided. Roma people are perceived as delinquents, dangerous, thieves, involved in drug trafficking, filthy, child exploiters, social state exploiters, closed group.

Teacher: There is a prejudice that they are going to steal something, that they form a closed group. It's always at the back of their mind. And they go unpunished. They steal and enter their camps, no one finds them. This is true.

Social worker: Admittedly, people's perceptions are negative. They reject them, ignore them, they think the Roma are filthy, thieves, drug users, drug dealers, infant traffickers. And they constantly mention robberies and cases of exploitation.

Nurse: Most of them are involved in thefts, quarrels, they exploit their children, and make them beg or steal.

The way the Roma are represented in the consciousness of the other people is mainly defined by the cultural elements marking their cultural diversity. These are not interpreted as cultural differences but rather as social deviation. This fact seems to be the main strengthening and causal factor for their social exclusion and spatial segregation. Namely, the Roma people, as a minority group, are treated through processes and conditions of individual and collective segregation in the social field, and therefore the perceptions and behaviours of the majority group members are oriented accordingly.

Social worker: … Illiteracy, they get married very young, drug users, they have many children and force them to beg.

Social worker: Their kids do not attend school or drop out of school. They get married at a pre-pubertal age. They beg for money, they are rude and pushy…. And to see babies in the arms of small children or in their mothers' arms, begging under the rain or the hot sun.

Teacher: The prevailing perceptions are negative, they are considered as marginal, socially 'unintegratable'; this has to do with their culture that is inconsistent with a permanent job or a permanent residence.

Through their references during the interviews, respondents acknowledge and mention that the wider society is socially differentiated from the Roma people as it adopts differentiated special roles, behaviours, responsibilities as well as normative

standards. In this context, the prevailing view ends up being that all the rest differ from Roma. These elements derive from social differentiation and confirm in a more robust manner the non-Roma supremacy and distance from the Roma people.

4.2. The evaluative system for the classification and segregation of the Roma people

The interviews suggest that the members of the wider social majority group also use symbolic elements in order to distance themselves from the position of the Roma people. The main symbols of differentiation and feeling of superiority seem to be related to the infringement of social rules in terms of moral issues, socialisation and social behaviour, education and training.

The evaluative system is, on the one hand, of a graduated character as it defines the Roma in a classification relation and, on the other, dichotomous because it identifies them as a separate, opposing group. Respondents use the same process when they attribute the Roma people roles and positions within the social system. Therefore, there is an inequality established between them in the form of social stratification. This fact appears to justify and make socially acceptable the way the Roma are pushed into distinct social spaces, in order to protect the rest.

The expression of Roma cultural differentiation is not accepted, as it is linked to the elements of dangerousness and delinquency stereotypically attributed to these people.

Teacher: I have no idea why they do not become integrated into society. In a way, this works like a vicious circle, people are wary of them and in turn the Roma people ring-fence themselves claiming their own, specific freedom.

Teacher: The responsibilities are as much those of the Roma, as they choose not to be integrated into society; it is true they get involved in criminal activities and often develop antisocial behaviour.

The perception of the Roma "nature", in ethical and social terms, is largely in the interest of the dominant group's members. This provides the members of the wider social group with a particularly stereotypical and simple pattern of perception. On this basis, they rationalise not only the quality but also the quantity of their social interaction with the Roma people. Furthermore, this ensures an exemplary means for keeping a social distance from them.

In general, according to the interviews, it seems that social attitudes towards the Roma include the stereotypical categorisation, depersonalisation and degradation attitudes. Categorisation attitudes are created when the majority of the dominant group members perceive Roma group members as only possessing homogenous

attributes and ignore their particular, individual qualities. Depersonalisation attitudes result from identifying Roma group members as not having the cognitive, emotional, ethical and social attributes defining the rest of the people. Finally, degradation attitudes result from assessments according to which the Roma are perceived as socially inferior to other people.

Besides, during everyday social interaction, the term "Roma" is not used in the sense of a culturally different group, but rather as a negative label. Respondents also mentioned the alternative terms "gypsies" and "tsinganoi" used by the members of the wider group when referring to the Roma people in their everyday social life, and which bear various negative connotations.

Social worker: The term gypsy is used to describe filthy, crooked, illiterate, dishonest, lazy people.

Teacher: They are described as gypsies or tsinganoi, as people who tend to cheat or steal.

Doctor: Roma means thieves, uncivilised, filthy, beggars, annoying people.

Teacher: People dislike their delinquent behaviour, illiteracy, bad tastes. That's why being a "gypsy" is considered a swear word.

The above descriptions are attributed in such a way that the Roma are profiled as people with negative social qualities. They refer to discredited, unreliable, untrustworthy, morally and socially impoverished people.

4.3. The socially unacceptable behaviours of Roma

Respondents mentioned a wide range of socially unacceptable behaviours that the wider community recognises as being displayed by the Roma people.

Social worker: I see as unacceptable their illiteracy, getting married at a very young age, drug use, and the fact that they have many children and force them to beg.

Social worker: One cannot accept the young marriage age, begging, the way they exploit their children, street children, their living conditions in the dumps, the way they seem to declare "we are Roma, don't mess with us", their actions involving drugs and guns in certain areas, as in Menidi.

Teacher: I consider as unacceptable and disagreeable elements their criminal behaviour, drug trafficking, marriage at a young age, the complete lack of schooling, their nomadic way of life.

These unconventional, socially unacceptable behaviours are perceived by the dominant social group as deviant. They are related in the social field in many differ-

ent ways and are identified with notions and mechanisms of oversight, supervision, authority and power to enforce the conventional social inclusion. The process of enforcing the dominant rule-based behaviour, which implies the social control exerted by the society over those it considers as people with deviant behaviour, seems to have multiple functions. By making the separation between the socially healthy and socially unhealthy people, and by socially limiting and excluding the latter, the social control fulfils a basic social function. It creates solidarity among those perceived as socially healthy, thus enhancing the common feeling of those with acceptable social behaviours.

Through this kind of processes, the Roma are forced to remain both socially and spatially in segregated and distinct spaces, such as "ghetto" camps. Furthermore, on a symbolic level, the creation of a scapegoat represented by socially deviant individuals, exactly as the Roma are perceived, contributes to the psychosocial balance and affirmation of the social health of the other society members.

4.4. Patterns of interpretation for the Roma people

In social encounters, the meaning people give to both the subjects and objects of their surroundings plays an important role. Such meanings are based on pre-existing classification and categorisation interpretations and are used as patterns of interpretation. They include categories and normative standards, and attribute meanings in relation to identity traits. As such, they make the distinction between the acceptable and the deviant on the basis of the dominant normative standards. In this way, social interaction is achieved under the conditions set out by the dominant group, in accordance with the dominant normative standards on identity established by the community. Those defined as deviant are considered to violate social rules in a stereotypical way; this is believed to be a characteristic of the entire Roma minority social group.

During the interviews, respondents mentioned stereotypes created as patterns of interpretation of the Roma people not according to the way they really are, but rather to the way they are considered a priori to be.

Social worker: They have their own ethics, nothing to do with the ethics of the wider society. They seek illegal ways to make money. Some of them are drug dealers, drug traffickers, thieves.

Teacher: It is believed they commit crimes, such as thefts, frauds, mostly vendettas between them. This is mainly due to their cultural code as well as the fact that they are marginalised.

Social worker: From what I hear both at a professional and social level, there is a widespread concern that gypsies do not wish to be integrated, they like being nomads, one can never understand them, they tend to exhibit delinquent behaviour.

The research indicates the existence of negative cognitive patterns towards the Roma. These lead to prejudices, including emotional and behavioural reactions, and constitute a set of mostly negative features attributed to the members of the Roma community which is regarded as a distinct category.

In general, according to the respondents, the Roma tend to be interpreted by the rest of society as high-risk individuals. Interaction with them is a priori perceived as a threat and potential exposure to risks. In particular, these patterns of interpretation are defined, to a significant extent, by a view shaped by generalised perceptions according to which aggressiveness, violence and delinquency are characteristics of the Roma people.

Social worker: This perception of Roma delinquent behaviour is really valid; Roma crime incidents are practically five times more than those caused by the non-Roma population. Thefts, robberies, possession and use of firearms, driving without a license, child neglect and childbearing at a very young age, smoking at a very young age.

Administrator: This is not a view, it's a reality. They steal, sell their children, and are engaged in unlawful activities. It's a matter of mentality; it's convenient for them not to be integrated into society. They never get punished for their unlawful acts. They should be compelled to send their children to school and declare their marriages. They do it on purpose in order to benefit from single mother allowances.

The perception according to which Roma pose a threat seems to be reproduced through primary socialisation processes within the family, as well as through related stories and myths spread among the majority group members and the media.

4.5. Socialisation and anti-Roma prejudices

Respondents mentioned perceptions of the Roma that were related to stereotypes transmitted to them by their family during childhood. These included a particularly scary and threatening dimension in the event of a possible interaction with them.

Social worker: I remember when I was a kid there were threats like "the gypsy will take you away" or "you must never drink water from the coffee pot, or else you are going to be married to a gypsy". Now, I hear about them on the news, whenever something happens, something that attracts public interest.

Nurse: Parents terrified their children by saying "eat your meal, or else I will ask the gypsy to take you away".

Sociologist: When we were children, our parents used to say "eat your meal, or else the gypsy will come and take you away", "be nice, or else I will ask the gypsy

to come". I grew up in the centre of the town of Megara, but we never had gypsies in the neighbourhood, I never made contact with them.

Anti-Roma prejudices and stereotypes seem to be part of a basic primary sociali-sation process. This process is particularly important, as it concerns the transmission of basic social skills, the internalisation of social rules and values, and the assimila-tion of behavioural norms by the young people; it is a process leading to their smooth integration into society and the attainment of a societal and cultural conti-nuity. Through socialisation, the children learn, identify with and internalise the var-ious elements of their culture.

It seems that Roma-related representations, which are transferred through an intergenerational and intrafamilial process connected with the element of threat, tend to significantly determine behaviours towards this social group. Also, these rep-resentations seem to prevent the eradication of prejudice. Prejudices established during childhood enjoy a kind of experiential legitimisation. They grow roots and are more difficult to question. Prejudices and stereotypes that are firmly established since the period of primary socialisation, and have become cultural memory and knowledge, are expected to harbour negative feelings towards the Roma minority group, despite the potential tolerant attitude of each individual.

Teacher: When we were kids the threat "the gypsy will take you away" was very common. There is a feeling of mistrust towards these different people which can remain hidden for quite a long time.

Teacher: My grandmother used to scare me by saying: "the gypsy woman will hide you under her clothes, she will take you away". When we met gypsy women, we turned away. We made sure we stayed away, at 200 metres.

Through this kind of socialisation process, young individuals adopt attitudes and behaviours towards Roma, internalise them, make them their own and then repro-duce them during their future social life.

4.6. Anti-Roma prejudices and the media

Further to the increase and reproduction of anti-Roma prejudices and negative stereotyping, respondents also recognise the role of the media. The image of the Roma suggested by the media is this of delinquent, dangerous and miserable peo-ple from whom the others should protect themselves, of whom the others should be aware.

Social worker: Most media portray this specific group in a highly negative way. Very often, the media attribute to them actions like infant trafficking, cheating of

public authorities and abuse of services with false information. They never report positive stories.

Nurse: The media usually stigmatise their image. They use with great ease negative and derogatory terms, especially when it comes to robberies, child abductions and drug trafficking.

Social worker: They depict them in the worst possible way. They are portrayed as criminals, lousy parents, they are said to sell their children.

Roma-related stories are covered by the news media in ways that attract attention and give rise to concern. The Roma people have no access to the media and therefore are unable to promote their own views. According to them, the media create their own reality about the Roma and do not depict the real situation. The media show and reproduce negative stereotypes by applying the principles of classification, categorisation and generalisation for the entire Roma social group. They focus on and continue to promote images where the Roma are depicted as criminals, dangerous imposters, drug dealers, kidnappers, infant traffickers, child exploiters.

4.7. Feelings towards Roma and hostility

Respondents also mentioned that the Roma evoke negative feelings to many people and these feelings may also stimulate respective behaviours.

Social worker: I believe most people are either afraid of the Roma or loathe them, or even feel sorry for them. Their feelings of fear are triggered by the media that show the Roma as thieves; their feelings of disgust are associated with the fact that the Roma do not wash often. People usually feel sorry when they see small children beg, while their feelings of hatred result from fear and disgust.

Social worker: Most of the time, people feel reserved towards the Roma. Their feelings are definitely negative, as deep inside they are afraid of them.

According to the respondents, the feelings shared by the rest of society towards the Roma include fear, reservation and disgust leading to avoidance and hatred. The Roma people are perceived as a threat by the rest. This seems to be an important factor triggering anxiety in cases of social interaction with them. These feelings, as well as the potential threat connected with the Roma, are a significant risk factor that fuels hostility towards this minority social group. Prejudice- and stereotype-based hostility may also be translated into action. That is, through an acting-out process, these hostile feelings are transformed into acts marked by violence, victimisation, authoritarianism and racism.

5. Discussion

The results of this research, based on the interviews of the participating education, health and welfare professionals, show that society is dominated by negative attitudes, fears, intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes towards the Roma people.

The representational model, around which revolves the dominant individual, interpersonal and collective social codification of the Roma, portrays them as people to be avoided. The Roma people are perceived as *delinquents, thieves, involved in drug trafficking, filthy, child exploiters, social state exploiters, extremely closed social group*. This seems to justify and make socially acceptable the fact that the Roma are being kept at a social distance and pushed away to distinct social and spatial areas, in order to protect the rest. The feelings that the rest of people tend to share towards the Roma include fear, reservation, disgust and hostility. This is an important factor increasing anxiety in cases of social interaction with them, as well as a significant risk factor leading to cases of racist incidents towards this minority social group.

In their Integrated Threat Theory, Stephan and Stephan (1996) note that prejudices are activated when people assume that their values and beliefs or social groups are under threat. They have identified four types of threats leading to prejudice: realistic threats, symbolic threats, negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety. They suggest that the threats in question are factors predicting negative attitudes towards the members of a minority group. The results of the present research confirm the evidence produced by other research testing the Integrated Threat Theory, as regards gender behaviour, attitudes towards immigrants, religious and racial groups (Stephan et al. 1999; Gonzalez et al. 2008), as well as the Roma (Kende et al. 2017), showing that the perceived endogenous threats are factors predicting negative attitudes towards the members of a minority group.

The incorporation, through introjection processes, and the acceptance by the members of a socially excluded group of the prejudices held against them, may result to internalised oppression. This is likely to lead to self-hatred, self-concealment, feelings of inferiority, resignation, isolation, powerlessness and gratefulness for being allowed to survive (Tappan 2006). Freire (1994) concludes that the oppressed internalise the sense of shame, humiliation, self-hatred and low self-esteem, a process that tends to result in social marginalisation and isolation.

The social exclusion of minorities, such as the Roma minority, becomes evident through the progressive social isolation of the group excluded by the dominant society (Silver and Miller 2003). This isolation results from various processes. In addition to marginalisation arising from a multilayered structural deprivation, one of the most common ways in which individuals and groups can be isolated is through stigmatisation processes. This kind of isolation is achieved by the creation and dissemination of social images that portray the excluded groups as possessing character

traits outside of, or even threatening to, common views of normalcy (Taket et al. 2009). This was also demonstrated in the present research. These images, as suggested by Kurzban and Leary (2001), are deeply embedded in the institutional practices that are precisely the soil on which inequality is nurtured and reproduced.

Furthermore, the results of this research have shown that education, health and welfare professionals, as indicated in their interviews, tend to reproduce and adopt prejudices and negative attitudes towards Roma. This fact is supported by other relevant studies. Gill's study (2013) has shown the processes which result to many health professionals having anti-Roma perceptions based on negative media stereotypes, while Goward et al (2006) note that health professionals lack knowledge about the beliefs and culture of the Roma communities. This can further label Roma communities, which as a result experience further limiting and/or punitive intervention because their culture is ignored or pathologised (Garrett 2005). In general, racism arising from staff prejudice is being blamed for the inverse relationship between Roma needs and their use of services.

It seems that, under the influence of the dominant social attitudes, education, health and welfare professionals risk of becoming vectors of the same anti-Roma prejudice and negative attitudes with the general population.

This fact is particularly crucial when it comes to social workers. In this case, professional values and social work ethics are called into question and their ability to provide the Roma with adequate and good quality services is affected. The dramatic social consequences of the neoliberal agenda, the effects on the most vulnerable groups and minorities, xenophobia and racism have an impact on social work. However, a renewed vision for dealing with the oppressive practices and policies has emerged. It is based on the principles of critical (Glaister 2008), anti-oppressive (Dominelli 1997; Green and Clarke 2016) and radical (Ferguson and Woodward 2009; Lavalette 2011) social work practice. In this framework, social work practice with the Roma needs to adopt an assertive approach, to be based on human rights and equal social relationships, and also to fight inequalities, call into question the oppressive institutional structures and practices and promote social justice and change.

Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to develop systematic interventions that enable the transformation of the negative attitudes and the integration of new perceptions, different ways of interpretation and new intervention methodologies, allowing social workers to ensure better results in their everyday work with the Roma people, so as to promote the efforts of their social inclusion. Against this background and in an effort to develop appropriate interventions easing the sense of threat and changing the anti-Roma attitudes held by professionals, it is necessary to focus on multicultural interventions and to adopt multicultural policies promoting the acceptance of diversity and equal opportunities, and reducing feelings of "out-group" threat (Berry 2006).

6. Conclusion

The research showed that education, health and welfare professionals, under the influence of dominant social attitudes, are likely to become vehicles of the same anti-Roma prejudices, negative attitudes and fear held by the general population. This may, to a greater or lesser degree, affect their behaviour and work. Therefore, the development of systematic interventions to change the professionals' negative attitudes and lead to the adoption of new perceptions, different interpretation strategies and intervention methods ensuring better results in their everyday work with the Roma and at the same time promoting their social integration should be a high priority for social work in Greece. In this framework and in an effort to develop appropriate interventions to reduce the feeling of threat and change the professionals' negative attitudes towards the Roma, it is essential to focus on multicultural, critical and anti-oppressive interventions and to adopt multicultural policies aimed at accepting diversity and fighting Roma discrimination and social exclusion.

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