

# Power Hierarchies between the Researcher and Informants: Critical Observations during Fieldwork in a Roma Settlement

**Jekatyerina Dunajeva**

katyadunajeva@gmail.com

Assistant Professor at the Institute of International Studies and Political Science  
Pázmány Péter Catholic University

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1826-6731>

Dr. Jekatyerina Dunajeva received her PhD at the University of Oregon. In her dissertation she examined how educational policies affect Roma identity formation over time in Hungary and Russia. Dr. Dunajeva's research has been published in several book chapters and peer-reviewed journals. Her fields of research are Roma, identity politics, minority integration, youth politics and youth empowerment, politics and religion, as well as state-formation and nation-building. Besides teaching at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Dr. Dunajeva also collaborates with international research groups, in addition to her work as a consultant and political analyst. She firmly believes in the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice, academia and public policy, and consequently seeks to explore policy-relevant questions in her research.



## Abstract

Scholars have long been interested in researching Roma; a form of “top-down research,” where the researcher analyzes, gathers data, and interviews the “objects” of the research, is still dominant in the field, although an increasing number of critics have been proposing ways of including Roma in knowledge production to shape the discourse about themselves. Exclusion of Roma in the process of research silences their voices and contributes to incomplete, flawed findings that often reinforce stereotypes. This paper takes a critical look at interactions and the power dynamics between the researcher and the informant(s) during research based on one in-depth case study: fieldwork conducted in a small town in Hungary in 2012–13. The presented research is one small step towards deconstructing knowledge production with a focus on research ethics and practice, rather than a large-scale paradigm change. This paper strives to transcend the scholarly field of Romani Studies specifically, and contribute to the broader literature on Social Science methodology, especially scholarship about interpretive methods and fieldwork.

## Keywords

- Fieldwork
- Roma
- Marginalization
- Knowledge production
- Ethics

# 1. Fieldwork: Challenges and Responsibilities

“The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts...which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (Geertz 1973, 452).

Fieldwork is characterized by the “desire to understand the social worlds inhabited by others as *they* understand those worlds”; fieldwork as a research tradition, however, had a troubled colonial past, treating native cultures as inferior (Hobbs and Wright 2006, x). With time, fieldwork as a form of inquiry became less colonially oriented, more aware of dangers of reification and objectification of the people being studied, and increasingly sensitive to the unequal power relations between the researcher and researched. Postcolonialism has gained ground among academics in the recent past, providing the ontological and theoretical foundation to examine marginalized and excluded communities, such as the Roma (see, for example, Ashton-Smith 2010).

Heron and Reason (2001) call it “traditional research,” when “people are treated as passive subjects rather than as active agents,” suggesting that research must be “conducted with people rather than on people,” because “ordinary people are quite capable of developing their own ideas and can work together in a cooperative inquiry group to see if these ideas make sense of their world and work in practice” (180). It is thus necessary to transcend such “traditional” forms of research, as a cooperative relationship between researcher and informant tends to result in more accurate knowledge.

Academics have produced a significant body of literature regarding appropriate ways to conduct ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., Amit 2000; Ritchie et al. 2013), including fieldwork with various vulnerable or marginalized groups (e.g., Hoolachan 2016; Medeiros 2017) or the “Others” (Scheyvens 2014). Furthermore, while positivist fieldwork is often characterized as blind to the agency of the researched (Fuller 2006, 334), the interpretivist fieldwork approach has expanded the scope and purpose of fieldwork to include reflexivity – the “inclusion of the observer in the subject matter itself” (McCall 2006, 3; see also Pachirat 2003 and Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006) – and give “voice to marginalized, subaltern viewpoints,” which may be an end in itself for researchers (Adcock, 2006: 61). The latter approach is also known as action research or participatory action research (Schwartz-Shea 2006: 104). Interpretivist research philosophy, concerned with “unpacking beliefs or meaning embodied in actions and practices” (Bevir 2006, 284), remains silent on the particular challenges of eliciting meaning when conducting research with marginalized minority groups as well as the ethical considerations of such research. This study intends to fill this gap.

Robert Chambers (1994) pioneered a form of participatory research which enabled “local people to share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions,” which he called Participatory Rural Appraisal (1993). Chambers acknowledged that “dominant behavior by outsiders may explain why it has taken until the 1990s for the analytical capabilities of local people to be better recognized...” (*ibid.*). Indeed, at this time, literature such as Whyte’s edited volume, *Participatory Action Research* (1991), has laid the foundation for further exploration and operationalization of more engaged research approaches. As a result of growing interest and focus on engagement with informants, nearly all subfields have expanded their methodological literature (see, for example, Low and Merry 2010; Piccoli and Mazzocchi 2016).

In addition, in order to recognize the power asymmetries between researcher and informants, it is not only the subaltern position of minorities that must be considered but also the invisible structures of white supremacy and privilege. This is the argument that Violeta Vajda (2015) makes in critiquing participatory research for its limitations. Vajda highlights the importance of “critical whiteness studies,” or in other words, the importance of non-Roma people’s critical view of their own racialized identity in the context of Roma othering:

Participatory research ... is held up as a way of allowing marginal communities to become more central in development projects, in political processes, or even in academia, in the hope that this would allow them to set the agenda. However, people don’t operate in an ideal world but one where power struggles have resulted in unequal relationships of oppression based on people’s identities (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba 2011). It is difficult to create a situation in which participation as defined above gives real influence to excluded communities such as the Roma, without engaging with wider philosophical and political issues of identity and power (Vajda 2015, 47).

In other words, it is imperative that researchers (in this case non-Roma) examine their own racialized identity in order to understand how othering and stereotypes are constructed and, in turn, influence interactions between researcher and informants.

Nevertheless, the challenges of conducting fieldwork with vulnerable and marginalized groups persist. Including informants in the process of knowledge-production and understanding the impact of power hierarchies between the researcher and informant are of central importance but often researchers fail to do this. It is also essential to recognize the power dynamics between the researcher and researched group(s). As Cupples and Kindon (2014) warn: “If you have worked in low-income communities or with groups who are marginalised, stigmatised or discriminated against, it is important to write in such a way that acknowledges that marginalisation but does not exacerbate it” (239). One strategy may be to “write about their struggles and agency” itself (*ibid.* 239). Yet, often “when the radical voice speaks about domination [they] are speaking to those who dominate, [and t]heir presence changes the nature and direction of the words [of the radical voice]” (hooks 1990, 154). Hence the following question arises: What is the most appropriate and ethical way to study marginalized communities?

Questions of ethics, justice, and fairness in research are indeed complex. Bell hooks (1990) in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* grasps the essence of unequal power relations during research:

Often this speech about the ‘other’ annihilates, erases: ‘no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority’ (208).

For hooks, those who possess power are those who are able to speak – speak through writing, expressing feelings, articulating inequalities. The most authentic and true voice is always the voice of the oppressed,

rather than any interpretation of it by the dominant group. Therefore, it is critical for the oppressed to use their voice, which becomes not only a way to convey their own thoughts, grievances, and needs but also because using one's own voice is a form of empowerment.

However, much research also fails to sufficiently acknowledge the agency of informants. While it is important to discuss the agency of the scholar, e.g., "I have used the personal pronoun 'I' to acknowledge my agency throughout the research process" (Hargreaves 2006, 255), agency of the informants must also be accounted for. Otherwise, the informants' space for agency ends up being determined by the researcher: when the researcher observes, what the researcher asks, how the researchers interprets, and which interactions the researcher notices.

Moreover, the attitude of the researcher is another significant aspect that influences research findings. In the case of poor and marginalized groups, the fundamental fault stemming from this is the following:

A danger is that rather than valuing our informants and the knowledge they possess, we pity them if they are marginalized ... We view our informants not as people who lead multi-dimensional lives – laughing, crying, celebrating, grieving and hoping, just like the rest of us – and who hold information that could increase our understanding of a particular topic, but as people we feel a need to help or that need to be taught something or to be taken down a peg or two. Our attitude towards people who face economic and other hardships should not be so shrouded by pity that we fail to see things of value in those we study (Scheyvens, Scheyvens, and Murray 2003, 168).

In other words, when conducting research with excluded, poor, oppressed, or in any way marginalized communities, researchers face a challenge in terms of their attitude towards the informants, which may influence their findings. The existence of any group must not be reduced to a single attribute, and researchers should not position themselves as the "rescuers" of the informants. Moreover, if the research concerns children or the youth<sup>[1]</sup> of the vulnerable group in question, it presents additional challenges: "[Children and youth] is rather a category taken for granted – seen but not heard, acted upon but not with" (Bowden 1998, 282).

It is important to acknowledge that there are academics who have indeed allowed informants to become (co-)creators of knowledge, rather than objects of research. Gay y Blasco and de la Cruz Hernandez (2012) in an effort to "write ethnography together and to propose a collaborative and egalitarian anthropology" collaborated with a Gitana (Roma) in writing an intriguing biographical ethnography, arguing that ethnographic knowledge is owned by both ethnographer and informant (1). Indeed, there are attempts to hear the voices of Roma (e.g., Ryder, Cemlyn, and Acton 2014; see also Bogdan et al. 2015; Ryder 2015) and thus, there is optimism that a new direction may emerge that strives to include Roma

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<sup>1</sup> I follow the legal definition of children, that is, those who are under 14 years of age. And, following the UN definition, youth are defined as those between the ages of 15 and 24. During research I was exposed to both groups, and mainly Roma between the ages of 6 and 16.

into discourses of empowerment and reevaluates the dynamics of power relationships. However, there is no consensus on the role of scholars making the voices of Roma heard; Stewart (2017) claims that, “academic knowledge production is not centred on speaking for, against or with certain populations” and consequently the “authority to speak” will not advance the field of Romani Studies (125, 127).

Recognizing the numerous challenges of researching marginalized groups – limited agency, unequal power dynamics, attitude of pity – this paper focuses on the actual process, that is, the methodology of research, rather than the product of research itself. Concerned with the ways a researcher can best represent the experiences lived by marginalized groups while conducting ethical and scholarly sound research, this paper strives to analyze *the particular interactions and the power dynamics between the researcher and the informant(s) during research*. To address this topic, I look at the example of the Roma minority, especially the experiences of Roma youth in one Hungarian settlement (Settlement A).<sup>[2]</sup> In this study I strove to treat children and youth as meaningful actors who can speak for themselves, whose voices deserve to be heard if their interests are to be acknowledged and served. It was typically uncommon to engage with young Roma in an equal manner at the field site – teachers, charity personnel, visitors, and researchers often regarded the young Roma as less autonomous, responsible, and reliable than the adults.

I am particularly interested in understanding the context and history of discrimination that frame responses, attitudes, and behaviors of the Roma who participated in my research. Given the oppression Roma face on a daily basis, I found that our initial interactions reflected this prejudiced environment. I discuss the power dynamics between Roma and non-Roma in detail. To that end, I made efforts to integrate into the community through frequent visits and by forging relationships with my informants; I worked together with a local woman to conduct a survey and then consulted with her regarding observations from my field research; I reached out to youth in the community who were often overlooked by others.

This paper offers a reflection on scholarly fieldwork conducted primarily in 2012–13 in a small Hungarian town that has a segregated Romani population. Fieldwork was conducted as part of my PhD dissertation and supported by two grants;<sup>[3]</sup> the dissertation examined the role of state schools in Roma identity formation over time in Hungary and Russia. As part of my fieldwork, I recorded over 50 interviews with teachers, directors, and community leaders, as well as over 30 interviews with Roma parents and young adults.<sup>[4]</sup> I also have numerous field notes, recordings from roundtables, public events, and public local gatherings, especially pertaining to Roma identity and education. All interviews were conducted in Hungarian and the translation into English was done by the author.

As a brief disclosure of my positionality in the field: my family and I moved from Russia to Hungary in 1988, where I grew up in a Russian household. In my early adult life, I moved to the United States

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2 To protect the identities of my respondents, I do not reveal the name of the settlement.

3 More specifically by a fellowship from the International Research & Exchanges Board, with funds provided by the United States Department of State through the Title VIII Program, and by a Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Fund graduate fellowship for international research. Neither of these organizations are responsible for the views expressed herein.

4 I visited one settlement on a regular basis during fieldwork and also took short trips to others and conducted interviews there.

and then returned to Hungary first for my research in 2012–13, then permanently in 2014. In different contexts, I was therefore seen as a Hungarian, Russian, *or* American by my informants but never as someone with a shared identity with them. I speak Hungarian, Russian, and English fluently. Upon my arrival to Hungary in 2012, I began taking Romani classes (Lovara dialect) but had virtually no occasion to use it, especially with young Roma. In the field site, only a small number of elderly spoke any dialect of Romani. Additionally, I often stood out as a young white woman, judged for not having children because I was in my late twenties at the time. This was an anomaly many commented on, usually inquiring why an “old woman” like me still had no children.

In this paper, rather than answer a research question *about* Roma, I look at *how* the attitudes, behaviors, and self-perceptions of Roma at Settlement A were informed by the daily interactions with me as a researcher from outside of their group/community, and in turn how these interactions shaped the way this particular group of Roma engaged with me as a researcher. I suggest that ways of engagement between two groups (researcher and informants) greatly influence what type of information is revealed; engagement encompasses the power dynamics, perceptions, biases, and past formative experience vis-à-vis the other group. Throughout this article, I use excerpts from field notes and field observations to illustrate arguments and share the immediate reflections from the period of my fieldwork.

## 2. Case Study: A Settlement Where ‘Electricians Are Stars’

When I first arrived to the town where Settlement A is located in the autumn of 2012, I asked for directions. A local non-Roma<sup>5</sup> suggested that I keep walking on the road until I see that “something is not quite right, and that is the Roma settlement.” Indeed, it was easy to find, as I wrote in my field notes:

The difference between the settlement and the rest of the town is so obvious that one cannot miss it. Going from neat suburban houses to an absolute run-down ‘ghetto’ still fails to capture the severity of the difference. Houses in the settlement are run down, many have no roofs or stable foundations, some houses are destroyed to the core. Social life is also very noticeably different: in non-Roma areas, very few people were on the streets (it was a Friday morning) and those few who were out minded their own business, without eye contact or greeting (although I clearly stood out [as a white, non-local]). In the settlement, everyone was out in the streets – adults and children. Running around half-naked (it was a very hot day), the children were screaming, playing, running, while the adults were socializing. I received many curious looks and a few greetings immediately (August 31, 2012).

The Romani settlement I studied had a rapidly increasing population of about 500 at the time of fieldwork (2012–13); young Roma comprised the majority of the residents. According to data compiled by a local

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5 While I do not believe that either Roma or non-Roma are homogeneous categories, nevertheless this distinction is important here to indicate in- and out-group membership.

charity, the average age in the Romani settlement was approximately 20 years, indicating high birth rates and low life expectancy. The level of education among the adults was low; the majority completed at most eight grades of elementary school and did not pursue studies past that. One resident suggested that “electricians are stars” there given the astonishingly high unemployment rate. The Roma population was diverse: there was intraethnic diversity, some were relatively new to the settlement while others had been living there longer, and there were a few non-Roma who integrated well with the Roma, usually through marriage.

During my research period, I traveled to and from Settlement A, choosing not to live there for several reasons: with large and extended families living together, space was scarce for everyone; I was advised not to stay there for health reasons; and I initially traveled with my partner, who did not speak Hungarian and would have had a hard time. According to survey data compiled by a local charity, the average size of living space for five people was 20 m<sup>2</sup> and only a sixth of all households had running water in their homes (survey discussed in Dunajeva 2017, 59).

I learned a great deal about the history of Settlement A from the director of the local charity. In a personal interview with him, he explained that:

When the [Socialist-era] housing projects were discontinued here, the families were put in ‘circus caravans.’ The beginning of our program in 2004 was to solve this issue. Some of the families were in the caravans sometimes for 10 years. As a result of this housing crisis many families were traumatized and fell apart as a consequence. This community is very bad [has weak social ties] as a result of this (May 29, 2013).

The animosity among residents was the reason why the charity decided not to include them in the decision-making process. This was slowly in the process of changing at the time of my fieldwork; young adults seemed to be increasingly cooperating with the charity, as I was told during my fieldwork. This young generation of local Roma saw the need for change, and while some wanted to leave (and live in the capital or abroad), others decided to stay and improve their living conditions by building sites for garbage disposal, for example.

I started coming to the settlement almost daily, at first spending most of my time at the charity’s community building, where I helped with school homework as a volunteer to anyone who came in for assistance. I got to know the parents when they wandered in and spent time listening to locals who were eager to talk about their problems with someone they saw as a “regular outsider.” I felt increasingly more confident knowing more names and being called by my name. Slowly my relationships became more personal and conversations became more profound.

Fieldwork was an emotional and educational journey: I learned to self-reflect, to critically see my own role as a researcher with an out-group status, to sympathize and empathize, and to see the resilience of the young Roma even amongst hardships. Indeed, “fieldwork is often humbling, and humility can spur different ways of thinking about knowledge production” (Schatz 2003, 11). Humility helped shed the pretense of objectivity early on – with my own identity, interests, preferences, and personal circumstances, the best I could do was to become more intimately involved in the research and become close with some



Roma whom I interacted with the most, hoping they would see me as a person first and foremost, rather than as a researcher alone.

To carry out my research, I relied mainly on participant observation, “in which a researcher takes part in daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002, 1 cited in McCall 2006, 4). During my regular visits, I attended and taught classes in the local school, tutored children in the charity building, visited homes, attended funerals, birthdays, holidays, and celebrations, joined families for lunches, had abundant cups of coffees and smoked cigarettes, and simply listened and observed. It took several months to be accepted as a visitor, and even more months to gain trust. Soon I found myself engaging in actions *with* the young Roma: we ate ice cream together, gossiped about teachers, danced, and played table football. At the end of each day I reflected on my experience and recorded my thoughts, producing lengthy pages of field notes.

I also regularly shared my camera with the children and youth so they could record their own experiences. At the end of the day, I had the photos printed and handed them out to the children, youth, and their families. Eventually, some families invited me to their homes to take family photos, so they could frame and hang them on their walls. As Sarah Pink (2009) argues, it is important to understand “how local people use photography, art, drawing, video and other (audio)visual media to represent the private and public narratives and contexts of their lives” (114). Also, Susan Sontag suggests that “photographs are evidence not only of what there is but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world” (cited in Niskač 2011, 140). Annabel Tremlett (2017) used photographs in order to examine non-stereotypical images and lived realities of Roma in Hungary. Photo elicitation in Tremlett’s research allowed the researcher to “put more of the power into the hands of the researched” (725). On nearly all occasions I was warned by non-Roma about the dangers of leaving my camera with the Roma, and on every occasion I received my camera back. Indeed, showing trust in the face of suspicion proved critical in laying a new foundation for our interaction.

Documenting the experience of my Roma informants immediately seemed to be a violation of their privacy, although privacy was a loose concept in this settlement: homes built by the charity were on display to visitors, while poorer homes had no doors, only curtains, which provided an ambiguous separation between the public and private sphere. One day there was a TV crew present. Usually such visits were meant to show the poverty that Roma live in and/or the achievements of the charity. The extent of objectification of the Roma by the TV crew (intentionally or not) was so abysmal that I felt ashamed merely because I was non-Roma just like the TV crew. In addition, because of the charity the local Roma met with a lot of various visitors, from non-Roma high school students who came to socialize with the Roma to non-Roma university students participating in integration programs or studying “Roma issues”, Hungarian government officials, and NGO representatives.

After many months of being at the field site, I noticed that the Roma/non-Roma and researcher/informant divisions started to blur. “Are you a Gypsy now, too?” asked one of the children on our walk to the ice cream parlor. “Sure I am,” I said, smiling back. Group membership, after all, “comes in shades of grey” (Schatz 2003, 7). Nevertheless, I do acknowledge my privileges: I still left the field site every evening,

the children still clung on to me begging to take them to the city, take them to my home, or at the very least, bring them some gifts the next day (for example, girls often wanted perfume). I was still seen as privileged, with resources and possibilities. Having left the community, I was always faced with my multiple roles: a confidante, a volunteer, a tutor, or, dare I say, a friend but, either way, I returned home as a researcher, recounting my day in words to my computer.

At first, it seemed difficult for me to open up about my own life to my informants – will I put myself in a vulnerable position by sharing my agony of going through divorce at the time of fieldwork? – but it quickly allowed for stronger bonds to form. I have never felt so close to anyone as I felt to the group of Roma I spent most of my time with. My heart ached when I had to return to my own reality and leave the country to write my dissertation in the U.S. For years to come I longed to write a personal account of my research. With this study I hope to fulfill this goal. Having gained some distance from my fieldwork in the years since, questions regarding how data was gathered and interpreted started to emerge. In the next section, I reflect on interactions during my fieldwork, exploring how the knowledge received can best be contextualized and analyzed.

### 3. Interpreting Words and Behavior

“[W]hat we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (Geertz 1973, 9).

Entering any community with the goal of research is, in a way, a form of trespassing. It is a “foreign territory” with unwritten rules and norms, with existing power dynamics and social hierarchies – all unknown to the researcher initially. Unfamiliar with these underlying conditions, the researcher nevertheless takes on the task to understand the community: this understanding must be embedded in the existing social context into which the researcher just entered and is likely to become a part of. For the Roma population I studied there were two defining institutions which shaped their behavior, attitudes, and interactions: the school and the local charity.<sup>[6]</sup> Hence, teachers, charity workers, and the occasional visitors to the charity were important players in the web of interactions that constructed a certain discourse about the local Roma. Such messages strongly influenced how Roma perceived themselves vis-à-vis the non-Roma, including the researcher(s).

#### Shaming, Infantilizing, and Pitying Roma

Based on the analysis of interviews and recordings, I grouped the attitudes towards Roma by non-Roma thematically in the following recurring categories: shaming, infantilizing, and pitying.<sup>[7]</sup> When shamed, topics such as “deficiency” of their language, culture, looks, identity, or other characteristics were described.

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<sup>6</sup> I recognize that family is a critical informal institution for youth as well; this study only considers formal institutions, however, as a more in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>7</sup> In order to further substantiate these categories, analysis of media discourse may be conducted in the future; such analysis is beyond the scope of this study.

In Hungarian, the word *roncs* (wreckage) was often used in these instances. When infantilizing, various forms of incompetence were listed that were used as pretexts for why the state/institution/non-Roma had to intervene and help Roma families. Sentences such as “we have to teach them the simplest of things” were common. Finally, when pitying, the interviewed non-Roma teachers often expressed that they “felt sorry” or “felt bad” for Roma due to their living conditions, family environment, and other reasons.

Other scholarly works have mentioned pitying, shaming, and infantilizing as underlying attitudes towards Roma by non-Roma. For instance, Kóczé and Trehan (2009) offer the following categories in relation to the Romani movement and based on Fanon’s (1965) discussion of objectification practices: infantilization, where “Roma are perceived to be, and are thus treated as, children”; and denigration, when “members of colonized groups are [treated as] ‘defective’” (Kóczé and Trehan 2009, 59). Furthermore, Liégeois (2007) showed that “throughout history, the least negative attitudes towards Roma/Gypsies have been romantic sympathy that is influenced by folklore...and an intellectual curiosity tempered by compassion or pity” (159). Okely (2014) argued that images used to portray Roma evoke feelings of pity (73), and Tessieri (2017) showed that media in Finland reinforced stereotypes and shamed minority groups like the Roma. Goodwin (2009), in turn, argued in his analysis of the the European Court of Human Rights case of *D.H. and Others v. Czech Republic* regarding the practice of assigning Roma in “special schools” that “the Court in *D.H. and Others* is at risk of infantilizing all Romani parents in a broad and sweeping denial of their ability to be proper parents” (102).

Roma live in an environment of intimidation and over-disciplinization. For instance, at the field site, the school-aged Roma were intimidated and disciplined by teachers into behaving a certain way at their school. They were often shamed for their looks – usually due to alleged lack of hygiene – and behavior – boys for violent behavior, girls for over-sexualized demeanor. To enforce a different appearance, the school decided to buy backpacks and make-up remover for girls because “Roma girls come with purses, pretending to be grown women,” as the principle shared with me. The next day I witnessed the arrival of new backpacks. As I noted in my fieldnotes:

A week after school started, I came in to the teachers’ room and noticed that in the usually organized and simple teachers’ room with a computer, printer, microwave, fridge and 2 lines of tables, now there are about 7 new backpacks, some as expensive as almost 11,000 forints (approximately \$50). I inquired who they were for. One teacher told me that these are solutions to the problems of the [Roma] girls: girls come with small purses, which is a ‘typical problem for the [Romani] settlement’ (September 4, 2012).

The school, in other words, took on the responsibility of “normalizing” the appearance and certain habits of Roma students into what it deemed to be appropriate.

False but popular stereotypes shared by some non-Roma wrongly portray Roma as incapable of self-discipline, wherein Roma parents are perceived as being unable to raise their own children, and Roma in general are seen as being incompetent at making appropriate decisions. When I talked to Romani parents about their children’s education, they often told me of the many challenges they must overcome to assure that their children succeed in school. “My daughter pretends she is a Magyar [Hungarian non-Roma] in school because of her lighter skin. I disapprove of that but she has more friends this way, likes school

and studies better,” said a parent of a fifth-grade student. Others lamented the scarce help their children receive in school and one parent stressed her role in “giving them [the children] everything I can so they become more than we [parents] are.”

As a result, infantilization of Roma by non-Roma was looming almost constantly in the background of all interactions. In their own neighborhood, the most banal places bore the same message: the only store in the settlement, the “Gypsy store,” to my surprise had no plastic bags (abundantly available in every grocery store in the country). “They steal ‘em,” yelled the clerk while handing me a plastic bag from behind the counter for my purchase. “They steal everything! Parents don’t teach their children not to steal and they don’t show a good example either,” the clerk continued. Roma, infantilized by the society, consequently are treated as incapable to care for themselves and are thus not granted due independence and autonomy.

One teacher shared with me that many students could not study beyond the eighth grade of elementary school because of their “infantile parents” who fail to value education, fail to recognize the importance of secondary education, and actively oppose any of the teachers’ efforts to help their children. Another teacher similarly referred to the adults of the Roma community as “infantile,” explaining that, “they are always searching for someone to blame, don’t want to change or improve and they can’t be independent,” referring to the social assistance that some of the local Roma rely on. Interacting with Roma families once again proved the contrary: “We want no regular handouts or social support, we want jobs, whether we have education or not, we need jobs,” said an elderly Roma woman who was raising her four grandchildren alone. Desire for change was expressed by virtually every Romani person with whom I spoke.

Pity was another feeling shared by many non-Roma towards Roma – the teachers pitied the Roma children for their inherited “backwardness,” the charity’s work was to help the “impoverished” and “incapable” Roma, and the visitors, even those with the smallest sense of compassion, pitied the community for the appalling poverty they witnessed. “I pity [the Roma] students,” said a teacher, “Just look at A., he is a thief [*lopós*], his parents are beaters [*verekedős*], and many of them don’t even speak proper Hungarian.” This blend of pity and racism was expressed on many occasions to me.

The director of the charity service described the evolving relationship between the charity and the community as the “helpers” and the “helped,” where the former referred broadly to the “outsider whites.” In this uneven relationship, the director suggested, there was a clear tension between the two groups: an over-reliance, at times expectation, of assistance from the “helpers,” while visitors were tested based on what they could provide: food, treats, money, loans, cigarettes. This relationship further reinforced the vulnerable position of Roma as a “helpless” group that requires outside assistance to satisfy basic needs.

The handouts and various forms of assistance were often delivered with a sense of pity as well, rather than a future vision of growth of empowerment. I must note that some assistance was nevertheless important, at times critical, but there were senseless and even humiliating handouts as well. I described one such example in my fieldnotes:

It was an unusually cold November afternoon when I arrived to the charity building – the big room was usually not heated so all children were crammed together in the small, heated

room. Besides, the big room was full of piles of large garbage bags: handouts and donations arrived today. I learned how ironic donations can be: not denying good intentions, but the uselessness of it was absolutely striking. This time, for example, there was large quantity of wedding stuff: wedding invitations, nice postcards with envelopes, lunch cards for wedding and some decorations... It is ironic because none of the Roma in the settlement will have such a wedding. There is a whole corner filled with donated clothes already. The last time there were donations the clothes were simply thrown on the ground and Roma came with carts and took some (sometimes without even looking) (November 12, 2012).

I discussed this issue with a Roma NGO worker, who also highlighted the absurdity of handouts. She shared another story: when donations contained red hair dye which neared its expiration date, within a matter of days most women had red hair – a sight that was inexplicably sad.

I conducted a survey (N=50) among the Roma residents in Settlement A concerning education and issues of discrimination.<sup>[8]</sup> The survey was done in cooperation with a local resident, a respected Roma woman in her forties. Her role was central: we consulted before and after visiting households regarding my role, questions to be asked, and later, the information we received. She was present during the interviews and advised on when she thought my presence would not be welcome, suggesting that some families may not be comfortable openly expressing their views with a non-Roma. As my associate was a confidante to many families and worked with the local social services, she knew most families very well and was, without a doubt, trusted by them.

The survey clearly revealed that the negative stereotypes were false. For instance, the widely-held belief that Roma parents did not care about education was false; support for education was evident among parents, even though most had negligible formal education themselves. What was particularly striking was the hope many of the parents had for their children while remaining pessimistic about their own future. Parents clearly wishing their children to have a better life saw that the answer lay in education: “I don’t want my son to be garbage like his father, he must study well”; “my parents thought that I, a woman, should not go to school, but I demand that my daughter doesn’t skip a single class”; “I wish for my children to go beyond elementary education and improve their lives.”

My associate and I usually engaged in informal conversations with several members of the household, where we raised topics of interest (e.g., school, teachers, their children’s performance, issues of discrimination, memories from the past). Many respondents complained about their inability to discuss these matters and desire to do so. Those who were less comfortable talking to me avoided any eye contact and talked to my Roma associate exclusively, in which case I refrained from asking questions. In some instances, I was not present and relied on insights from my associate. I took notes usually immediately after the meeting, rather than during the conversation. We regularly discussed these household visits – my associate was able to contextualize the answers having known the families for many years, at times

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<sup>8</sup> The survey was conducted for fieldwork and was concerned primarily with questions on Roma identity and education. For more on the survey, see Dunajeva (2014).

she pointed out when my questions might be misleading, or if I might have misunderstood any answers. Over time, I got to know some of the families more intimately myself, yet these discussions with my associate remained invaluable in my attempt to construct an accurate understanding that was sensitive to the particular environment in which that many of the local Roma live.

In short, negative attitudes towards Roma – shaming, infantilizing, and pitying – generate false and destructive stereotypes. Such pervasive stereotypes can contribute to a climate of hostility and reinforce power asymmetries between Roma and non-Roma, affecting interactions between the non-Roma researcher (me) and Roma informants, too. Consequently, it is important to consider the position of the scholar in social hierarchies by taking into account the racialization and othering that Roma experience in the face of an often unquestioned white normativity. The next section explores interactions during fieldwork, highlighting the importance of: (1) contextualizing messages, given the cultural, political, and social subordinate position of the local Roma; and (2) critical, self-reflexive scrutiny of the researcher's positionality.

## Interactions between Roma and non-Roma

In the context of this highly discriminating and shaming environment, breaking the rules seemed to be a way of life, a way to resist and exert power. After school, for instance, Roma children bragged about their mischief: “We ate food during class today, several times,” shared a fifth-grader with pride. Breaking class discipline, talking back in a “Roma accent,” and endlessly showing up in the mornings with lipstick only appeared to prove the children's determination to continue a pattern of behavior deemed as undesirable by outsiders. Yet many of the local Roma did feel marginalized and unwelcome often in the company of non-Roma, whether in school or at times talking to non-Roma researchers – myself initially and those researchers who visited the settlement occasionally. A genuine instance of realization was my interaction with a 10-year-old Roma girl (N.), who became very dear to me:

As we were sitting and discussing her homework, the girl's mother came. N. got very visibly uncomfortable: while before she was cheerful and outspoken, she became reserved and anxious. Her mother stopped by to look at what we were doing, greeted me with a serious expression, and was satisfied that her daughter is taught and helped. Several times the mother tried to say something, when N. would interrupt her, talk over her, and eventually simply shout: ‘Shut up! Go away! Come on, go away from here!’ (September 7, 2012).

I felt nervous: should I discipline N. indicating to the mother that she is respected? Should I not interfere and potentially allow the mother to assume that I am indifferent to N.'s behavior? Soon it was clear to me that N. is simply ashamed of her mother, who seemed to represent the poverty, the culture, and the conditions she lived in. I had seen N. in the school and the tutoring room, where she presented herself differently: a flamboyant, talkative, outspoken, and brave girl. When her mother stepped in, the little girl showed another aspect of her personality and made it clear that she was ashamed of her mother:

N.'s mother left and N. immediately asked me: ‘Isn't she fat and ugly?’ On the one hand, I thought, this girl must be deeply ashamed of her family, while on the other hand it might be a test for me, as this was a question and not a statement. Would I think her mother, a woman

in her late forties with serious health issues living in poverty, is ugly? No, in fact I thought her mother was a caring woman, burdened by her existential problems. I told N. her mother was beautiful. Then N. turned silent and did not utter a word for several awkward minutes. I broke the silence to inquire what she wants to be when she is a grown-up. ‘Anything,’ she first replied. ‘Anything and whatever,’ she repeated. Moments later she corrected herself: ‘I want to sail the ocean! I want to find the remains of the Titanic! I want to move to America!’ (September 7, 2012).

Appreciating the role of parents, against what N. and her peers would hear in their school, and complimenting them on the least expected qualities, whether parents’ appearance or girls’ make-up, were small steps that I took towards forging a relationship that departed from the usual unequal treatment Roma were used to by non-Roma.

On the surface, N.’s behavior, it seemed to me, was that of shame and embarrassment. However, when put into context, it can be interpreted as a reaction to the negative treatment N. faces – I felt that she expected me (and majority society more generally) to see her mother as “fat and ugly.” On another occasion I believed she similarly tried to hush and dismiss her many siblings in my presence, murmuring something about the great number of children in the family. Once again, I interpreted her behavior as her way of noticeably acting upon the common stereotype of large Roma families that she had likely heard in school, media, and other sources, and learned to feel guilty about. In the privacy of her home, as I learned from my Roma associate and later witnessed myself, she was a caring daughter and sister.

My presence as a non-Roma researcher seemed to provoke shame among my informants in being Roma on several other occasions as well. Another striking example was between two adult men in the community. None of the Roma men knew me; I felt I merely embodied a non-Roma outsider for them:

Two Roma men were sitting in the charity and took out their cell phones immediately when I came in. I felt like I interrupted something and felt awkward that my presence provoked discomfort. The two men started talking, occasionally looking at me, accentuating my presence:

Man 1: [says something in Romani]

Man 2: [very uncomfortably responds, looking periodically at me and noticing my presence]  
Talk like a normal person, come on! Who is a Gypsy here?! Not me!

Man 1: Neither am I! I was made by Turks and Russians [laughs]. I am a little bit of a Jew as well, which is why I think whether I should steal or bargain at the market!

[Both laugh.] (August 31, 2012).

This short exchange was rather telling – the presence of a non-Roma (i.e., me) seemed to make the Romani language appear embarrassing. Indeed, in my previous research about Roma youth welfare and Romani language, my colleague and I found that the Romani language in Hungary is seen popularly as an obstacle for advancement and academic achievements (Dunajeva and Tidrick 2015, 14–15). Meanwhile, empirical evidence conducted among Roma children in Hungary proves the contrary, that is, that Romani language is not a barrier to academic achievement (Derdák and Varga 1996).

On another occasion, a discussion about discrimination provoked strong feelings towards non-Roma, as a representative of the dominant group:

I asked an older Romani woman about her experience before regime change and whether her life improved now. To the question whether the situation will change in the future, she replied: ‘No, it will only get worse! There won’t be any jobs and if there will be, not for us [Gypsies].’ She became increasingly agitated and insisted on sharing an example, about her family member who is a qualified butcher and yet doesn’t have a job: ‘If you are a Gypsy, the job is filled,’ she complained, ‘even if you want to work.’ As the only non-Roma in the room, she addressed her last grievance to me, with her voice raised, frowning her eyebrows: ‘I don’t know what the future brings... Of course Gypsies are to blame as well, but let’s consider the example of criminality: if I steal a chicken, I get 5 years in prison. If you embezzle 5 million forints, you get what? Maybe you get suspended. But you stole as well! And here is where there is the biggest difference between us [Roma and non-Roma]!’ (October 9, 2013).

Keenly aware of the injustices, I interpreted this woman’s behavior as pointing out how structural racism in Hungary perpetuates inequality in the criminal justice system and beyond. Also, this woman seemed to notably shift our attention from Roma, seen as the oppressed, to non-Roma, who are not only the oppressors, but also due to their unearned privilege of whiteness, are allowed to carry on with little or no punishment, even for grave offences. This attitude also highlighted that ethical considerations in research, where whiteness and ethnocentrism are generally taken for granted; we can no longer suspend “the ethical’ in our dealings with the ‘other’” and must liberate the “‘truth’ from its unexamined Eurocentric and Orientalist presuppositions” (Scheper-Hughes 1995, 409).

In summary, these instances highlighted the importance of embedding research findings in the realities of the group in order to untangle the messages conveyed. It is also important to note that within this small settlement, most issues – e.g., discrimination, Roma-non-Roma relations – were not perceived the same way by all Roma respondents. Contextualizing therefore had to be done on an individual basis. It was apparent that Roma must not only speak for themselves, but it is also important to fully appreciate the underlying capacity, constraints, and conditions in the act of speaking itself.

## Conclusion

In summary, this study strove to analyze interactions and power dynamics between the researcher and the informant(s) during research. Even though interpretivist methodology is sensitive to meaning and the constructed nature of realities, researchers must still be sensitive to the asymmetries of power in the context of interactions, in this case between the Roma minority and non-Roma researcher. To this end, I explored the power asymmetries that exist between Roma and the (non-Roma dominated) institutions (e.g., charity and the school), as well as Roma and various individuals (e.g., institutional actors, non-Roma researcher, members of the dominant society).

Giving voice to marginalized communities is important, and while other researchers may have acknowledged this responsibility as well, the ethically appropriate ways of doing so remain obscure.



Indeed, it is critical to consider the deeply rooted forms of oppression, power dynamics, and social hierarchies that define the context in which “talking back” (hooks 1989) takes place. Researchers’ task is also to contextualize verbal and non-verbal communication in their efforts to interpret findings. In this study, which was limited to one particular settlement in Hungary, I considered the network of actors (institutions, groups, and individuals) in order to lay out the power hierarchies dominant in the field site. I showed that Roma often were pitied, shamed, and infantilized; subsequently, I found traces of this treatment during my interactions with them as well.

This type of treatment continuously reinforced the position of Roma as the subaltern group. Negative messages tend to be internalized and reflected during interactions between informants and researcher. The relationship between the researcher vis-à-vis the researched group given the power asymmetries is, however, not fixed and fully determined; there may in fact be ways to renegotiate existing hierarchies of power. In relation to my fieldwork, means of power renegotiation included showing trust to Roma who were otherwise treated with distrust (e.g., sharing my camera with the children/youth); appreciation of the roles parents play even if school teachers and society at large treat them as part of the problem; engaging in the same activities as informants (play table football and other games); opening up so that the researcher learns about informants while they can learn about the researcher as well.

Importantly, just like the category “Roma” is not homogeneous, and group members react differently to societal discrimination (e.g., some internalize while others resist discriminatory messages), similarly non-Roma members may either perpetuate or instead strive to renegotiate these existing hierarchies. The researcher could take up the latter role, striving to form equal relationships with the Roma informants in an effort to include Roma in the research process and produce more accurate findings. Since vulnerable groups tend to be marginalized and discriminated against in mainstream society, if silenced during research and the phase of knowledge-production, such groups experience *cumulative exclusion* as a result. There is no doubt that fieldwork as a research method has a tremendous range of responsibilities and ethical questions to consider.

With this article I also wished to contribute to the advancement of interpretivist methods in elucidating the possible challenges hidden in the relationship between the researcher and informants, with consideration of power asymmetries between the two. Beyond the importance of self-reflexivity on the researcher’s part, the researcher must carefully identify the factors (e.g., institutions, groups, historical factors, media, and alike) that define the relationship between the researcher and informants. This awareness, in turn, will help to contextualize findings in order to construct more accurate knowledge of important social issues.

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