

The image of Roma people in a group of social workers. Some reflections on the presence of stereotypes and on the burden of discrimination in social services following the conclusion of a research study

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Abstract

Roma and Sinti people experience a particular, specific type of stigmatisation and social injustice, that have built up over 5 centuries. This paper intends to investigate the image of Roma people in a professional group of 246 social workers in boroughs in Friuli Venezia Giulia. Investigating the perceptions expressed by the social workers on such a socially stigmatised ethnic minority, that is often subjected to institutional controls and repression, serve to check the weight that social representations have on the operators who in their work should express the ideals of social justice, equality and the refusal of social exclusion and discrimination that are expressed in international and national social services' code of ethics.

Keywords

Social workers, Roma people, social representation, stigmatization, discrimination.

Introduction

This paper intends to investigate the image of Roma people in a professional group of social workers in boroughs in Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG, Italy). 246 social workers from boroughs within FVG took part in the study presented here.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first provides an overview of the problematic relationship between social services and gypsy populations, i.e. Roma and Sinti users. As we will see, this matter is set in a wider debate that focuses on the role played by social services in the fight to defend and promote the rights of ethnic minority groups.

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This debate has become a topical one again further to the increase in migration flows and the emergence of social feelings and institutional actions characterised by the lack of solidarity for immigrants and those belonging to some ethnic minority groups.

In the second and final section, the results obtained in the research will be analysed by a graphic representation of images that the social workers globally expressed in a hypothetical «Roma user» and by a factor analysis of the interviewees' responses.

Investigating the perceptions expressed by the social workers on such a socially stigmatised ethnic minority, that is often subjected to institutional controls and repression, serve to check the weight that social representations have on the operators who in their work should express the ideals of social justice, equality and the refusal of social exclusion and discrimination that are expressed in international and national social services' code of ethics.

Roma and Sinti people in the social work system: also a matter of discriminations

Social work is a discipline that involves the values of solidarity, equality, social justice and a refusal of discrimination.¹ The defence and promotion of first, second and third generation human rights² is a matter that cannot be separated from the professional work of social workers and configures social work as a tool that should contribute to promoting new forms of cohabitation based on mutual respect, the enhancement of diversity and the fight against processes of social exclusion.

International debate on the ethical and political dimension of social work and on the role that this theoretical-practical discipline plays in pursuing democratic ideals is lively and articulated, and has been further fuelled in the last 3 decades when democratic systems have had to address the management of increasing migratory flows (Davidson et al., 2017). Immigration management policies have proven to be progressively less generous, if not more hostile, in accommodating the entry and stay of incoming societies (Ambrosini, 2010; Palidda, 2009). The increasingly less inclusive and solidaristic nature of public immigrant reception systems has evolved alongside an increase in controls and repression

¹ <https://cnoas.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Il-nuovo-codice-deontologico-dellassistente-sociale.pdf>

² «Social work embraces first, second and third-generation rights. First generation rights refer to civil and political rights, such as free speech and conscience and freedom from torture and arbitrary detention; second generation to socio-economic and cultural rights that include the rights to reasonable levels of education, healthcare, and housing and minority language rights; and third generation rights focus on the natural world and the right to species biodiversity and inter-generational equity. These rights are mutually reinforcing and interdependent, and accommodate both individual and collective rights». ISFW, International Federation of Social Workers, Global Definition of Social Work, July 2014, <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>

practised on a huge part of the foreign population, especially those who have not fulfilled all the legal criteria established in order to access new incoming societies (Allievi & Della Zuanna, 2016). Immigration management has therefore added to the scientific debate on the role played by social work in a social and political picture characterised by heavy hostility towards foreigners and other ethnic minorities, especially the most stigmatised and subjected to exclusion and repression by the police forces (Dal Lago, 2004). In particular, an important part of this debate is also the reflection on the relationship between social services and Roma and Sinti populations. As they ethnic minority groups have been subject to prejudice and violence for centuries (also from institutions), the analysis on the way Roma and Sinti people are treated by social and healthcare services as a whole is extremely useful to highlight the processes that feed stigmatisation and exclusion and that can sometimes be encountered even among immigrant populations and vice versa. For example, it has been noticed that in the illegal immigrant identification and expulsion centres, there are often Roma and Sinti people who hold Italian citizenship and have been in Italy for several generations (Marinaro & Sigona, 2011).

As some authors maintain (Gelardi, 2010), analysing the treatment that democratic societies reserve for ethnic minorities is a useful insight for revealing dynamics that actually concern a large part of the native population, especially the population that finds itself in similar socio-economic conditions to the immigrants or other minority groups. It is certainly true that Roma and Sinti people experience a particular, specific type of stigmatisation and social injustice, that have built up over 5 centuries (Piasere, 2004). It is also true that in social work literature, as we will see below, a kind of correlation emerges between the disadvantageous conditions for accessing social service resources and for institutional control processes that Roma and Sinti people are subjected to and similar conditions forced on a part of the immigrant population. We can therefore talk about the existence of a «hostile» relationship model between a part of the social services system and individuals belonging to those ethnic minorities who find themselves suffering particular social stigmatisation. Social work is placed in a particular difficult situation as on the one hand, its ethical principles make it a promoter of inclusive processes, while on the other hand, it must also carry out the role of controlling levels of social assistance resources provided and the uses made of said resources by the recipients. If such controls are guided by criteria of intervention efficiency and efficacy on a disadvantaged and structurally discriminated population, social work runs the actual risk of turning into a tool for preserving the status quo and maintaining factors of injustice (Lu et al., 2004).

We have one example of all this on the matter of protecting Roma and Sinti minors who live in the nomad camps. In Italy, being an under-age child of an immigrant or gypsy family is a condition that exposes them to higher possibilities of being protected by social services than children from the native population (Piasere, 2012). In one research carried out in 7 courts in Italy, analysing data from 1985-2005, it was found that 3-9% (with peaks of 12%) of all adoptability procedures concerned Roma and Sinti children. If we consider

that the incidence of the Roma and Sinti population in Italy stands at around 0.15% of the total population, the gypsy children declared to be adoptable in Italy between 1985 and 2005 were 20-80 times over-represented compared to their presence in the general population.³ The high possibility of being the subject of authorised procedures to remove them from their families is accompanied — for Roma and Sinti children — by a lack of social support for parental networks, especially for those thousands of people forced to live in the so-called «nomad camps». As research by Monasta (2004, 2005) shows, when carried out in 5 Italian camps on Roma and Sinti mothers with children aged 0-5 years old, the health condition of the gypsy children in the camps was terrible. Only 39% of the families have access to running water, with no hot water even in the winter. The camps are overcrowded and houses are made from recovered materials, taken from waste dumps, that are polluting and easily inflammable. The camps are also located in unhealthy places, close to dumps or road junctions. All this causes high illness rates and terrible health conditions for adults and children alike. The latter, when born, have a percentage of those born underweight that is on a par with what occurs in Egypt, Iran and Zimbabwe. Also, the mothers interviewed stated that in the 15 days prior to the interview, 32% of their children had diarrhoea and 55% has a cough, with 23% with asthma. These children and their families were not given the possibility of asserting their rights to health, even though the camp conditions are well known to the local authorities and municipal social services, and also to schools (Piasere, 2012).

These conditions are created and amplified by heavy social stigmatisation that exists against the gypsy populations, a stigmatisation that hinders their normal inclusion in the labour market and in their accessing essential services (such as housing) (Ambrosini, 2010). According to Eurobarometro (2007, 2008), 77% of European citizens believe it is a disadvantage to belong to the Roma minority, while another 24% wouldn't want a Roma as a neighbour. In Italy, 10% of the interviewees stated that they would have no problem having a Roma as a neighbour. According to an Ispo survey from 2008 (Sigona, 2009), «[...] Italians have an extremely negative view of the Roma people: 47% of interviewees see them predominantly as thieves, delinquents and layabouts, while 35% connect their image to nomad camps, neglect and dirt». In another study published in 2015 by the Pew Research, is «reported that 86 per cent of the respondent in Italy held a negative opinion about Roma» (European Commission, 2018). Even if the estimation provided by the Italian authorities indicated the number of Rom and Sinti (and the others Gypsy groups like Caminanti) of 110,000 to 180,000 individuals, which represents only around 0.23 to 0.25 per cent of the total population «In the last few years the proliferation of antigypsyism has increased the producers of racist content have spread and diversified: traditional media still have their importance in the matter, but local political actors, local news websites,

³ A situation of disparity in treatment of immigrant families' children by social services has been found in the USA (Lu et al., 2004) and in Europe (Bywaters et al., 2017).

self-produced “unofficial information” blogs, Facebook groups and even private pages on social networks have started to contribute to the spread on anti-Roma speeches» (European Commission, 2018). Even if about half of this population has Italian citizenship, in the media debate and in the speeches of politicians Roma people are always described as foreigners living in «nomad camps».

In this setting, if social services intervene for the sole purpose of providing assistance and protecting children’s welfare, regardless of an analysis and intervention on disadvantageous structural social conditions that weigh on all the people living in nomad camps, then it is clear that social workers contribute to perpetuating social violence by social care institutions. On this subject, we must point out that a very similar situation of social disadvantage and institutional controls as experienced by the Roma and Sinti people is found to also be present in a part of foreign families that emigrated to Italy, Europe and the USA (Bywaters et al., 2016). The incidence of controls and removal of children among families belonging to these social groups is much higher than that among native families (Stokes & Schmidt, 2011), confirmation of the fact that in democratic societies there are global reinforcement of control processes in progress to the detriment of solidaristic ones. The professional social work community must therefore question itself on its own attitude and role that it must play when dealing with the most disadvantaged and stigmatised ethnic minorities and, as we will see below, the results obtained from the survey of FVG borough social workers allow us to contribute to this debate.

Materials and methods

The study presented here took place during the autumn and winter months of 2018. One self-administered questionnaire was distributed to 246 social workers and were then collected and processed starting in the spring of 2019. The sample group interviewed represents a very significant share of the total of social workers who work in the towns and cities in FVG. In fact, 16 territorial areas out of a total of 18 joined the study, and 246 social workers out of a total of 320 filled out the self-administered questionnaires, meaning 75% of the total staff working within the territorial areas. Therefore a very high percentage of local authority social workers took part in the study, therefore, meaning that this study is close to reaching a criterion of general representativeness — compared to the FVG Region — of the results of the questionnaire.⁴ The questionnaires returned after being filled out showed a high degree of participation in the research by social workers,

⁴ In Italy social services are organized at the municipal level. In Italy there are about 8,000 municipalities and each municipal administration has the task of providing social services and material resources to its own population. This situation is characterized by a great disparity of resources between the various municipalities and by a notable difference in management models.

as the overall number of missing answers was extremely low and was distributed rather casually among the various questions asked.

One section of the self-administered questionnaire was dedicated to obtaining the perceptions that social workers have about some «typical users». The data that will be commented on below is about the perception of a «typical Roma user» of municipal social services. A set of questions with 11 items was constructed in the self-administered questionnaire, in order to capture the image that municipal social workers have of the Roma. The questions asked the social workers to express a subjective opinion of the «typical Roma user» of social services. These 11 items concerned 3 areas of psychosocial perception:

- a) aspects of social desirability (8 items);
- b) social dynamism (2 items);
- c) social prestige (1 item).⁵

Each interviewee was asked to place themselves within the space between two poles of conceptual extremes, depending on how close they felt to one or the other term.

Limit of the study

The research was not focused on specifically investigating the complex issue of the relationship between Roma, Sinti and social services in Italy. Perceptions of social workers were measured on a scale with only 11 items. Furthermore, the influence exerted on social workers by their work organizations was also not taken into consideration.

Results

The overall picture emerging from the interviewees' responses is shown in Fig. 1.

The first observation that we can make is that the average overall choice indicate a certain «caution» in opinion by the FVG municipal social workers about the characteristics of a general «Roma user». There are no choices towards the extreme semantics, although, on analysing the 3 areas of psychosocial perception, we can see how there tends to be a negative perception regarding social prestige and desirability. In particular, we have a part confirmation of the fact that, according to social workers, a Roma user tends to be non-collaborative, ungrateful, a liar and dirty. Another image that emerges is that the Roma user is partly sensitive, healthy, good-looking, happy and, as far as dynamism is

⁵ The *items* concerning the area of social desirability are as follows: «Collaborative-Non collaborative»; «Calm-Aggressive»; «Sensitive-Not sensitive»; «Grateful-Ungrateful»; «Honest-Liar»; «Healthy-Ill»; «Good-looking-Ugly»; «Happy-Sad». The items referring to the dynamism area are as follows: «Strong-Weak»; «Active-Passive». The item referring to social prestige was: «Clean-Dirty».

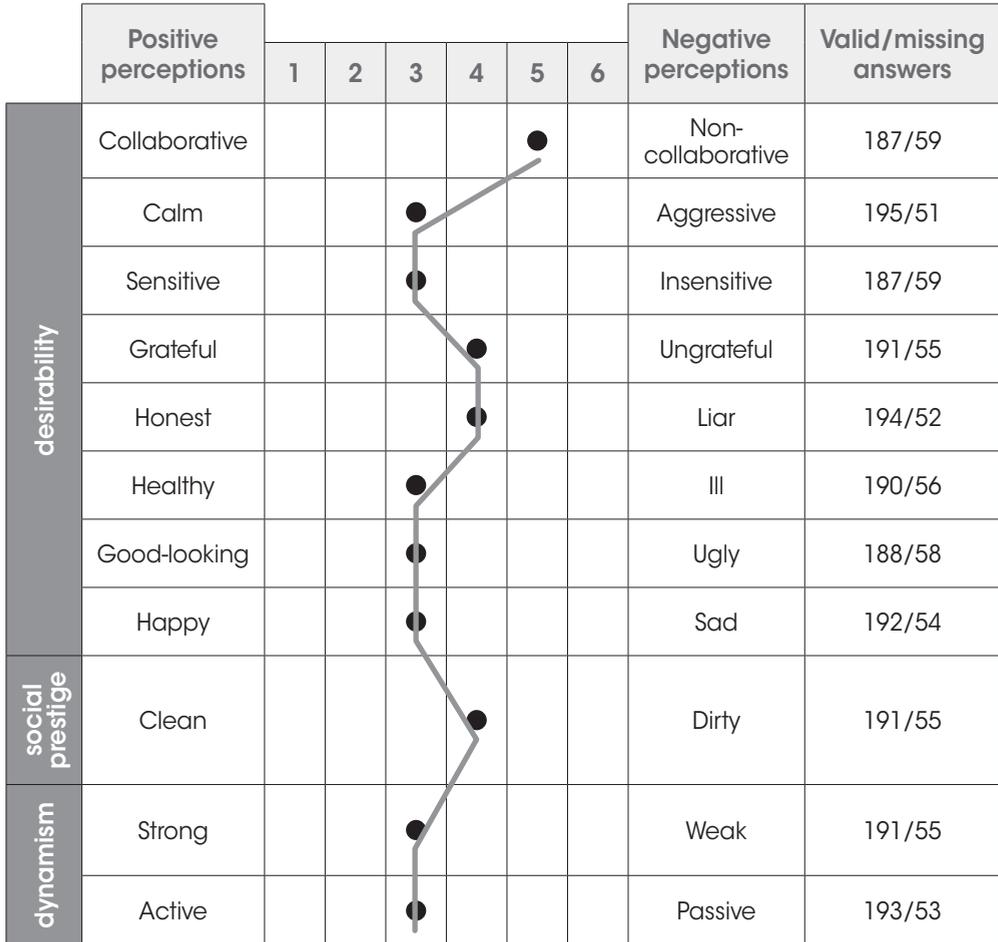


Fig. 1. «A Roma user is a person...». Graphic representation of the highest percentages of choices made by a group of social workers from towns in FVG regarding each position placed between the two semantic extremes ($n = 246$).

concerned, tends to be strong and active. This overall image is constructed, however, only by considering the options that had most choices, by percentages. If we wanted to understand whether more complex models of conceptual representation of a «Roma user» emerge from our group of interviewees, we would need to use more sophisticated analysis tools. For this purpose, therefore, we analysed the opinions expressed by the interviewees using a factor analysis.⁶

As we can see in Table 1, the results obtained from the factor analysis allow us to see how two latent dimensions emerge from the group of interviewees.

1. The first dimension that we might name «The enemy Roma», sees 5 items that are heavily and positively correlated with each other towards the pole of negative opinions. The «enemy Roma» is a person who is perceived to be non-collaborative, aggressive, insensitive, ungrateful and a liar.
2. The second dimension, that we can call «The fragile Roma» comprises 3 items, that are again towards a pole of non-positive opinions. The «fragile Roma» is a sad, weak, passive person.

Therefore, the factor analysis brings to light how we can grasp the existence of two complex perceptions in the interviewees' responses, both of which are negative, of the Roma user. A part of these perceptions is also perhaps linked to some professional experiences they have had with some Roma users, experiences that may have been particularly negative and frustrating. In scientific literature, it is shown how it is mainly recently-migrated Roma groups, without family and parental support, who don't work and who generally live in nomad camps or in dilapidated housing, who turn to social services (Ambrosini, 2005). This section of the population is marginalised and is destined to be inefficient through deviant behaviour and intervention of social services. However, these results are interesting in light of the fact that these perceptions, in most cases, are not the product of a direct encounter between social workers and Roma people, as only a small part of the interviewees declared that they had had Roma people among their clients. Specifically, about 25% of the interviewees declared that during their daily work, they had frequently addressed problems brought by Roma people. The remaining 75% of social workers declared that it was rare to deal with problems brought to them by people from the Roma minority.⁷ Therefore, even though direct professional experience of Roma people among the social workers was a small percentage of the workers, the negative perceptions of this minority seemed to emerge from within the social services. This very negative underlying opinion also affects issues that are presented by Roma people to

⁶ Extraction method: analysis of the main components. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser standardisation.

⁷ There were only 25 missing answers to this question. This would appear to confirm that the not-particularly positive attitudes towards a hypothetical Roma user may not be connected to a tangible professional experience.

Rotated matrix of components		
	Component	
	1	2
A Roma person is not collaborative	.788	.066
A Roma person is aggressive	.717	.292
A Roma person is insensitive	.738	.181
A Roma person is ungrateful	.804	.153
A Roma person is a liar	.773	-.051
A Roma person is health/ill	.449	.501
A Roma person is good-looking/ugly	.642	.497
A Roma person is clean/dirty	.621	.241
A Roma person is sad	.094	.847
A weak Roma person	.025	.856
A Roma person is passive	.235	.770
Extraction method: main analysis components. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser standardisation. The rotation reached the convergence criteria in 3 iterations.		

Table 1 Factor analysis of answers to a set of questions with the possibility of choosing from 1 to 6, where 1 is the positive semantic pole and 6 is the negative semantic pole ($n=246$).

the various towns' social services. In fact, when looking at the answers to the opinion of how solvable problems brought to social workers by Roma users are⁸ on a scale of 0 to 5 (where 0 = «It is a problem that is difficult to resolve»; 5 = «It is a problem easy to resolve»), the average score of resolvability of problems brought by Roma people was rather low (2.29), without any statistically significant difference emerging between the average scores of those with more or less professional experience with this ethnic group.

Of course, the social stereotypes of the gypsy populations has an inevitable weight on these negative judgements. These stigmatisations are passed down the generations and can only be doubted by increasing knowledge of the Roma and Sinti culture and social organisation, and all this would be even more necessary for those who carry out basic social work training. Actually, less than thirty interviewees (just over 9% of the total) declared that they had received basic training on Roma and Sinti topics, and less than 5% of all interviewees (about ten people) stated that in the last 5 years, they had undergone professional CPD on gypsy population topics.

Discussion

We can state that the group of social workers involved in the survey that the data herein was taken from and that we are discussing, did not doubt their own conceptual categories, by which they socially negatively observe the gypsy populations. If we consider the fact that the Roma and Sinti population that accesses social services is almost always in great need and has a lack of resources, also due to social injustice as determined by the discrimination that weighs on these people, the fact that the social workers had almost never had the chance to reflect on these topics, nor had basic training or continuous professional development training, is an element for concern, due to the quality of work offered by the social workers and due to the low possibility that Roma and Sinti people are offered the possibility of freeing themselves from the condition they find themselves in. Reflecting on the contribution that social work should provide for combating social injustice factors that affect some minority groups, it has become a central matter after the increase in migratory flows in parliamentary democracies. Social work's code of ethics acknowledges that this discipline should contribute to fighting those processes that cause the social disadvantages and needs that reduce any possibility of autonomy among those belonging to these minority groups. Gypsy populations are an example of the effect produced by discrimination and social injustice. These populations have been subjected to centuries of stigmatisation that forces them to live in a state of permanent defence, and even of being forced to assimilate. Roma and Sinti people are represented

⁸ The set of questions was asked as follows: In your professional experience, giving a score from 0 to 5 (where 0 = «It is a problem that is difficult to resolve»; 5 = «It is a problem easy to resolve»), how far — in your opinion — can the following problems be solved?

by the mass media through stereotypes that prevent a meeting of gypsy and non-gypsy populations. Those forced to live in nomad camps must accept inhumane conditions that are forced upon them by local authorities and which also affect children and teenagers. Often, meetings between Roma and Sinti people from the camps and social workers is focused on action taken to protect minors, which is forced and does not consider social factors that led to the conditions in which the children find themselves and that are don't even attempt to look for solutions to these conditions. It is no coincidence that in gypsy culture, the *gagé* (those who aren't Roma) are seen as the «thieves of Roma children». However, unlike the false stereotype of the «Roma thief of children», the number of minors removed from the gypsy populations and fostered by non-Roma and non-Sinti families within a child protective system is actually high and is an element of concern due to the possibility that this contributes to making the culture of these populations disappear (Piasere, 2012).

Conclusions

The data commented on in this study helps to highlight the fact that more support for social workers is necessary within a process of critical reflection about the role they play in controlling problems that the Roma or Sinti find themselves addressing. Without training about Roma and Sinti culture and on the effect of social stigmatisation that these groups are affected by, social workers' actions are often transformed into another tool of oppression and institutional violence. If the negative social associations about Roma and Sinti are transmitted by primary socialisation processes, basic and continuous training is a precious opportunity to question a part of the symbolic universe passed down to us. In this way, the quality of social worker' actions may improve, to the benefit of all users, but social services may also make their own mandate effective — that is to defend and promote the rights of those belonging to the social groups that suffer most discrimination. All this would appear to be even more urgent today, at a time when there is widespread hostility towards meeting and welcoming immigrants, also those people forced to flee situations that placed their own life in danger.

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