

Cultural Shock, Trauma, and the Resilience of Roma Academics in Higher Education

DIANA ABURAS

Abstract

In recent years, a growing phenomenon has emerged, minorities worldwide are voicing their long-silenced narratives. These narratives include systemic racism, colonial legacies, and cultural erasure which will be explored in more detail later. This research aims to amplify the voices of an under-researched minority that faces significant marginalization in higher education and across broader society. Roma communities form Europe's largest ethnic minority, are estimated to be between 10-12 million. However, they are also one of the most marginalised groups and face similar challenges in all countries, including: racism; poverty; precarious housing; underemployment, and poor health. One important facet of marginalization is educational exclusion including segregation and low attainment; it is estimated that less than one percent graduate from a higher education institute. This suggests there are approximately 100,000 Roma students in higher education in Europe. However, gaps in ethnic monitoring make it difficult to give precise numbers and some would argue the estimate of 100,000 could be an overestimate. An inability to access higher education accentuates Roma exclusion and the ability to attain prominent decision-making positions that might have a significant impact on Roma communities. Roma's participation in higher education is essential for social justice, economic growth, cultural diversity, and the development of a more equal and inclusive society where everyone has a fair chance to succeed.

Keywords: Cultural Shock, Cultural Trauma, Resilience, Roma Academics, Coping Mechanisms

Introduction

Roma academic integration into European higher education offers an intriguing but little-studied nexus of institutional, social, and cultural factors. With an emphasis on their difficulties, potential identity crises, and the strategies for building resilience in navigating academia, this paper explores the complex realities of Roma academics. The prevalence of culture shock, identity conflict, and perceptions of “Anti-Gypsyism” in academic settings, as well as the influence of institutional policies like affirmative action on their development, are key concerns in this investigation.

The research also looks into how Roma academics view and interact with affirmative action, as well as whether these practices increase resilience or make pre-existing issues worse.

It also looks at the two pressures they encounter: the possibility of alienation from their own communities as a result of pursuing higher education, and racism or exclusion within academic institutions. By examining these intricate relationships, the study hopes to shed light on the coping methods and tactics used by Roma scholars to survive and prosper in these disputed environments, in addition to the structural obstacles. The paper aims to add to larger discussions on inclusion, equity, and the role of resilience in forming marginalised identities in academia by using this perspective.

Context

According to estimates from the Council of Europe, the Roma population in Europe ranges between 10-12 million, with approximately six million residing in the European Union (EU). Unfortunately, this population continues to be affected by poverty and social exclusion. European institutions have pledged their commitment to promoting Roma inclusion by implementing reporting mechanisms and funding to support this process. However, policymakers lack reliable statistics on the target population, which hinders the development of effective indicators for improvement.¹ One reason for this is the lack of a clear definition for the target group in policy documents.

A major landmark in the recent history of the Roma was in 1971 when the first World Romani Congress was organised.² From this point onward, the emphasis on a shared origin and the Indian homeland began to play a more prominent role in shaping Roma collective identity and national consciousness.³ This event was a catalyst

¹ Matras–Leggio (ed.) 2017.

² Acton 1974.

³ Guszmán 2017, 2019, 2020; Majtényi–Majtényi 2020.

to campaigns and advocacy for Roma rights. Today efforts are underway to enhance the socio-economic conditions and human rights of the Roma population. Across the globe, several organisations, governments, and activists are working towards reducing discrimination and ensuring access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities for Roma individuals. Furthermore, cultural initiatives aim to preserve and celebrate Roma heritage.⁴

In recent years, the Roma community has continued to strive for recognition, inclusion, and equal treatment. Public awareness campaigns, policy changes, and increased representation in decision-making processes are some of the steps taken to address the historical injustices and ongoing challenges faced by this community. As part of this process of resistance, Critical Romani Studies and Activism has emerged, seeking not only empowerment and recognition but also redistribution/fundamental socio-economic and structural change while encouraging intersectional alliances.⁵ Critical Romani Studies has given a major impetus to new insights into the experiences of Roma in higher education, this point will be developed later in the discussion.

Roma in higher education

Education is an essential component of any thriving society contributing to development, identity, acting as a democratic check and balance and agent for inclusion. Education empowers us with the necessary skills to think critically, work efficiently, and make informed decisions. It strengthens our cultural capital and increases our likelihood of success.⁶

According to Liégeois, education can enhance personal autonomy for the Roma people. It equips them with tools to adapt to a changing environment and defend themselves against assimilation. Education provides an avenue for the Roma to break free from the passive cycle of welfare and engage in cultural and political development.⁷ However, it is crucial to note that institutional racism has been a common experience for Roma communities, leading to segregation, exclusion, and distrust of education. Education has been viewed as a tool of assimilation, perpetuating institutional racism.

Systemic or institutional racism refers to discriminatory practices organised within political or social institutions. It intentionally or unintentionally discriminates against a particular group of people, restricting their rights. It is based on the cultural beliefs of a dominant group that views their behaviour as the standard to which all other

⁴ Rostas 2019.

⁵ Ryder–Taba–Trehan 2014.

⁶ Bourdieu 1986.

⁷ Liégeois 1998.

cultural practices should conform. Institutional racism systematically benefits certain ethnic or cultural groups while marginalising and disadvantaging others. Identifying and fighting institutional racism is challenging, especially when it is perpetrated by non-racist institutions and governments. When institutional racism exists in multiple social contexts, it reinforces the disadvantages already experienced by certain members of a community.⁸

Research has shown that obtaining more years of education is correlated with higher earnings in the workforce. Therefore, education is often considered a pathway to advancing one's career and breaking the cycle of poverty.⁹

Out of the ten to twelve million Roma people believed to live in Europe, it is estimated barely one percent pursue higher education.¹⁰ The Roma population has comparable social, political, and economic issues across the continent while being distributed throughout Europe and beyond. The low achievement, attendance, and access of Roma people in the educational system is one of the main concerns.

Discrimination and marginalization

According to Ciaian and Kancs, anti-Roma discrimination has been deeply ingrained over centuries of oppressive policies and discriminatory attitudes from the dominant population. This discrimination continues to play a pivotal role in reinforcing the division between Roma and non-Roma, perpetuating two separate and segregated groups within society. Unfortunately, the prevalence of anti-Roma discrimination limits the mainstream population's willingness to accept the Roma community.¹¹

Schooling is a particularly good example of the segregation and marginalization of Roma children. Some Roma parents are reluctant to send their children to mainstream schools because of the hostile attitudes of non-Roma children (also often of teachers) toward Roma children; these attitudes are widely observed in schools in Europe.¹² This hostile behaviour increases the social costs of Roma children acquiring formal education, as they may face emotional and/or physical abuse when attending a mainstream school. Such a hostile environment reinforces the demarcation between Roma and non-Roma, thus reducing the chances of completing school and so lowering the probability of finding employment.¹³

⁸ Blum 2020.

⁹ Müskens–Hanft 2009.

¹⁰ Bracic 2020.

¹¹ Ciaian–Kancs 2016.

¹² Kertesi–Kézdi 2011.

¹³ Matras 2015.

In traditional Roma culture, the customary practice is to provide education to children from within the family and the Roma community. Sending their children to non-Roma schools is often avoided by very traditional Roma parents due to concerns about potential cultural clashes such as assimilation or bullying. Of particular importance to traditional communities is the period of puberty, during which children become subject to *Marimé*. This entails a need to avoid certain activities, such as sexual education of children. As a result, some parents withdraw their children from school during this period.¹⁴ However, recent studies suggest that through effective home/school liaison and curricular flexibility traditional Roma communities can and do effectively participate in mainstream education.

Furthermore, in some communities, exclusion and bonding social capital have led to strict boundary maintenance, creating an elevated level of mistrust towards outsiders, including academics.¹⁵ While only a small but notable number of Roma have achieved status within academia and produced “insider” accounts, this trend is increasing in recent times.

In East Central European (ECE) countries with substantial Roma populations, inequalities between Roma and non-Roma are stark and often begin early in life. Some of these inequalities stem from hard-wired family circumstances, such as growing up in a household at the bottom of the income distribution or having parents with little education.

Roma people are at a substantial risk of human rights violations in the European Union, according to reliable statistical data from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) since 2008. FRA surveys conducted in 2008, 2011, 2016, and 2019 show limited progress in improving the situation for Roma people despite the best efforts of the EU and its member states. These surveys reveal that anti-Gypsyism is still a problem, and many Roma people still struggle to enjoy fundamental rights such as employment, education, healthcare, and housing.

FRA conducted another survey in 2021, focusing on Roma people in Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Macedonia, and Serbia. This survey included interviews with over 8,400 Roma people and collected information on more than 20,000 people living in their households. The survey provides unique data and information that is not available in European general population surveys, which do not break down based on ethnic origin. The results of this survey reveal a familiar picture of exclusion, deprivation, discrimination, and racism.

¹⁴ Sway 1984.

¹⁵ Rostas–Ryder 2012.

There has been little to no improvement in education, as more than 70 percent of young Roma people continue to drop out of school. Only 27 percent of 20–24-year-olds have completed upper secondary education, and 71 percent of 18–24-year-olds leave school early.

More than half (52 percent) of 6–15-year-old Roma children in compulsory school are enrolled in schools with segregation (44 percent in 2016). Segregation is most common (65 percent) in Slovakia and Bulgaria (64 percent). Discrimination when in contact with school authorities (7 percent in 2016, 11 percent in 2021) increased across the surveyed EU countries. In 2016, one in five (27 percent) Roma children reported experiencing hate-motivated bullied/harassed behaviour while in school.¹⁶

The survey draws attention to the ongoing prejudice, deprivation, and exclusion that Roma people experience, especially in the field of education. It points out that there hasn't been much progress in Roma youth education, with many not finishing secondary school and a sizable percentage of young Roma continuing to drop out of school. The pervasive segregation in schools, where Roma children are frequently kept isolated from their classmates in learning environments, exacerbates this lack of academic advancement. The section also emphasises the startlingly high rate of bullying and hate-motivated harassment, as well as the rise in recorded cases of prejudice when Roma youngsters engage with school officials.

Moreover, the survey emphasises how crucial education is to mending social injustices and eliminating the poverty cycle. It highlights the need for inclusive policy and high-quality education to give Roma children the chance to improve their social and economic circumstances. Despite these obstacles, the evidence indicates that structural problems such as school segregation and prejudice persist, underscoring the necessity of more concerted efforts to establish a fair learning environment for Roma communities.

Anti-Gypsyism as a form of discrimination

Anti-Gypsyism is the specific form of racism that is directed against Roma, Sinti, Travellers, and other people who are seen as 'Gypsies' in popular culture. Anti-Gypsyism is often used in a narrow sense to indicate anti-Roma attitudes or the expression of negative stereotypes in the public sphere or hate speech. However, anti-Gypsyism gives rise to a much wider spectrum of discriminatory expressions and practices, including many implicit or hidden manifestations. Anti-Gypsyism is not only about what is being

¹⁶ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. *Roma Inclusion 2020-2021: Survey Findings*. Vienna: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2021.

said but also about what is being done and what is not being done. To recognise its full impact, a more precise understanding is crucial.¹⁷ More so, anti-Gypsyism also becomes a broader discriminatory spectrum that also recognises the hidden agendas about the Roma. Given this, it is claimed that the institutions that are supposed to protect the rights of the Roma often fail to do so because of anti-Gypsyism, since anti-Gypsyism too, is rooted deep within these institutions and power structures of European societies.

Anti-Gypsyism/anti-Roma discrimination has existed for centuries. It was an essential element in the persecution and annihilation policies against Roma as perpetrated by Nazi Germany, and those fascist and extreme nationalist partners and other collaborators who participated in these crimes.

The Romani academic Ethel Brooks stated that the experience of Roma included: *“Racism, forced evictions, racially motivated attacks, police abuse, segregation, inhuman and degrading treatment, housing discrimination, expulsions and marginalization, educational segregation, and the denial of access to schools, of unfair detention, hate speech, and hate crimes among other forms of violence (and the need to combat) structural forms of anti-Romani racism at all levels. This anti-Romani sentiment is rooted in a mainstream lack of understanding of the history and culture of this ethnic group and constructed narratives of ‘otherness’”*.¹⁸

Today, this community is systematically scapegoated, instrumentalised, and deprived of any economic, political, or cultural power. 26 percent of Roma reported having suffered from discrimination in Eastern and Southern European Union member states as opposed to 45 percent in Western countries. This difference should not be understood as less discrimination in this part of Europe, but rather as the greater awareness of rights in the West or the more public acceptance of discrimination in Eastern Europe.¹⁹ It shows the internalization process of the hatred rhetoric against the Roma people.

Anti-Gypsyism has deep historical roots in our societies. The strenuous relationship between majority populations and those stigmatised as ‘Gypsies’ can be described as part of a common heritage, which underscores its persistence and occurrence across different countries, in Europe and beyond. The emergence of anti-Gypsyism is not to be confused with the migration of Romani people’s ancestors into certain regions. Rather, it flows from processes of social construction and projection that are prevalent elements of the development of European ‘civilization’. Against this constant factor, the ideological justifications of the unequal treatment of Roma and other groups,

¹⁷ Van Baar 2014.

¹⁸ Brooks 2012: 1–11.

¹⁹ Makszimov 2020.

and the practices of discrimination and persecution of them, have been shaped and reshaped over and over and should be understood against the backdrop of historical developments and events.

From the eighteenth century, academic interest in Roma communities grew apace. However, academia has at times been more of a foe than friend, adopting hierarchical research approaches but also forms of scientific, racial, and cultural racism, which gave credence and support to policies of genocide and assimilation.

From Gypsyism to Romani Studies

During the late 18th century in Europe, orientalism emerged, leading to the development of Gypsyism. Heinrich Grellman, a German writer, published *Die Zigeuner* (The Gypsies) in 1783, which marked a significant shift in the perception of Romanies. According to Lee, this paper was the first European scholarly work in which ‘the Gypsy’ was considered a discursive subject for systematic study based on rational scientific principles of that time. Despite further marginalization and objectification of the Roma by Grellman, his writing stands out from other 18th-century European writers as it marked a clear departure from the vagrancy discourse of the late 18th century to the new discourse of “racialization”.

Similar to Jewish Studies, African American Studies, Women’s Studies, and other group-centred interdisciplinary fields of study, contemporary Romani Studies focuses on the social, economic, cultural, and political lives of the various Roma communities across the globe, as well as their interactions with ‘mainstream societies’.

Unlike Jewish studies (one of whose origins can be traced back to the study of Judeo-Christian scriptures within Yeshiva), African-American or Women’s Studies (both of which emerged in the context of emancipation struggles led by activists from their respective communities), the study of Romani in the UK and elsewhere in Europe was based on specific orientalist ideas about Gypsies/Roma, developed by intellectuals outside of the Romani community²⁰. Consequently, the studies of Romani have been disconnected from the emancipation struggles of the Romani peoples, despite the efforts of a few scholars to bring their scholarship and politics together.²¹

Romani studies differ from other disciplines in two significant ways. Firstly, attempts have been made to synthesise knowledge and provide critical trajectories, the field’s historical origins are rooted in the study of Gypsyism, a form of orientalism that specifically pertains to the study of Romani people and culture. Orientalism,

²⁰ Acton 1998.

²¹ Hancock 2000.

according to Said²², refers to the “*system of concepts, presumptions, and discursive practices that were employed in the production, interpretation, and evaluation of knowledge about non-European peoples*”. Said further argued that the classification and organisation of knowledge about the oriental world is a means of asserting power.

Non-Roma individuals have always been in charge of classifying and studying Roma knowledge since Roma voices are absent from the field. This situation remains prevalent today, as evidenced by the scarcity of Roma scholars at professional body meetings such as the Gypsy Lore Society. Much like the studies of the “other” that occurred in Europe more than a century ago, non-Roma scholars still primarily conduct contemporary Roma studies.

The exclusion of Roma perspectives in research projects conducted in their own communities remains a persistent issue in academic and policy circles. Despite the establishment of several institutional structures by the European Union and the Council of Europe to promote cooperation among researchers, policy makers, and stakeholders in the field of Roma studies, there is still a prevalent tendency to view Roma researchers and scholars as ‘objects’ and exclude them from full collaboration. This practice is considered by some scholars to be another form of infantilization of the Roma, as critical Roma scholars and their perspectives are excluded from the dialogue. Furthermore, this exclusion has led to a positivist approach to studying the Roma by privileged white academics who tend to be hostile to the critical thinking of the new Romani Studies.

The European Academic Network on Roma (EANRS), established in 2011, aimed to address this ongoing issue. However, it was criticised for not providing a fixed representation of self-identified Roma on the scientific committee elected by the EANRS. Activists and emerging Roma scholars also criticised the Network, claiming that non-Roma scholars were hostile to them, and that institutional racism existed. This criticism created significant tensions between established academics and younger critical/Romani scholars and was a catalyst to the development of Critical Romani Studies.²³

The exclusion of Roma perspectives is due to assorted reasons, including the disillusionment of some scholars who have contributed to their own marginalization by refusing to participate in mainstream debates that they see as hijacked by non-Roma. This trend is concerning, and it is being challenged by a new generation of independent researchers who have started to write about these controversial dynamics of power in an open way.

The research I am conducting will assess the legacy of this tension and in what forms it may exist today. It will delve into the multifaceted reasons behind the

²² Said 2003.

²³ Beck–Ivasiuc (ed.) 2018.

exclusion of Roma perspectives and critically evaluate the effectiveness of the institutional structures established to address this issue. Ultimately, the research aims to provide insights into how to achieve more equitable and inclusive practices in Roma studies.

Development of Critical Race Theory

Critical Romani Studies is an emerging field of academic research that focuses on the impact of racism on the Romani community and their identity. Scholars in this field draw from a range of disciplines, including post-colonial studies, intersectionality, feminist criticism, and Critical Race Theory to analyse and illuminate the structural discrimination and inequalities experienced by the Romani people.

Critical Race Theory provides a framework for understanding the complex interplay between race and power within social and institutional structures. It describes how power is a structural concept shaped by society's ideologies and beliefs, which is dependent on context, space, status, and race. It also examines the persistent inequalities present in various contexts, including those related to race, culture, gender, social class, and education.²⁴ The Critical Race Theory in Higher Education aims to address the institutional and structural forms of racism, discrimination, and prejudice that exist and hinder the academic achievement of Roma. By emphasising the role of institutions in perpetuating inequalities in opportunities and outcomes, Critical Race Theory provides an up-to-date analysis and discourse on the educational performance of Roma in higher education.

At the beginning of the 21st century in Europe, the academic, cultural, and political discourse shifted from the discourse of assimilation of the Roma people to the discourse of historical justice, political accountability, and Roma rights. In recent years, academic and artistic voices of the Roma diaspora have addressed questions around access to knowledge production, self-representation, voice positionality, and reflexivity.²⁵

The study of Critical Romani Studies is essential to creating a more just and equitable society where all individuals, regardless of their ethnicity or race, have equal opportunities and are free from discrimination. By advancing this field of study, scholars can work towards a better understanding of the structural discrimination and inequalities faced by the Romani community, as well as the ways to address and overcome them. This will require continued interdisciplinary collaboration and a

²⁴ Wiggan–Gadd 2020.

²⁵ Kóczé 2015: 91–110.

commitment to challenging the underlying assumptions and biases that perpetuate racism and discrimination in our society.²⁶

The conflict in Romani Studies between critical and more established scholars is primarily concerned with the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. This conflict reflects the long-standing tensions between scientism, the idea that the researcher should maintain objectivity and distance, and the principles of embodied research. As part of my research, I will assess the positions Roma academics assume in these contestations.

Affirmative actions as an inclusion instrument for the Roma in Europe

The European Union (EU) has identified the Roma as a marginalised ethnic minority group that faces widespread discrimination and socio-economic exclusion. As a condition for membership, the EU has put pressure on prospective member states to address these issues, which has led to the adoption of institutions, legislation and projects aimed at reducing discrimination and socio-economic disparities for the Roma. While some progress has been made, discrimination, poverty, segregation, and exclusion are still major problems for the Roma community. Additionally, the Roma remain under-represented in every country in which they reside. These outcomes reflect the EU's ongoing efforts to promote and protect ethnic minorities in East Central Europe since the 1990s. Despite the EU's support for improved treatment of the Roma, these countries are left with a mixed bag of policies, practices, and norms that both support inclusion and exclusion.

Some countries have also adopted affirmative action measures to help rectify or offset the disadvantages and discriminatory practices long faced by Roma. For example, since 1992, and more broadly since 1998, Romania has had reserved spaces for Roma in both secondary and higher education, supporting the enrolment of over 10,000 students in secondary and vocational education from 2000 to 2006 and over 1,400 students at universities.²⁷ It also established several affirmative action programs to support Roma teachers.²⁸ Hungary has incorporated affirmative action into its tertiary education, and provides free textbooks, some social benefits, mentoring and scholarships to Roma students.²⁹ The Czech Republic has subsidy programs to support primary and secondary

²⁶ Ryder et al 2014.

²⁷ Bojinca–Munteanu–Toth 2009.

²⁸ Fox–Vidra 2013.

²⁹ Roma Education Fund, "Roma Inclusion in Education," position paper, October 20, 2010, www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/roma_inclusion_in_education_position_paper.pdf.

school education. In 2013, Slovakia adopted an amendment to its anti-discrimination legislation allowing positive discrimination ('temporary equalization measures') with the goal of 'ensuring equal opportunities, in employment, education, health care and housing, thereby addressing social and economic disadvantages that may stem from racial or ethnic origin as well as other factors.'³⁰ All the countries examined here have also taken advantage of external funding to support Roma education, especially the thousands of scholarships provided for Roma university students in ECE through the Roma Education Fund, as well as EU funds. Some critics would argue that such affirmative measures only create forms of tokenism creating a Roma elite and giving the impression things are improving, also it is argued such measures fail to fundamentally challenge the structural and deep cultural drivers of inequality.

The participation of Roma students in universities is gradually rising in Hungary and other European nations as a result of government initiatives. This is important for shifting societal perspectives as well as for individual Roma students. Raising the profile of Roma students in higher education can help dispel myths and show that members of the Roma community can succeed academically. Additionally, having Roma students on campus helps foster a more diversified learning environment that fosters cross-cultural communication and comprehension.

Many Roma students continue to encounter major institutional and cultural obstacles despite the financial assistance and educational opportunities provided by state initiatives. In this situation, the idea of "culture shock" is very pertinent. Roma students frequently originate from under-represented groups and struggle to fit in at university. These challenges can be made worse by low self-esteem, discrimination, and feelings of loneliness. The shift from segregated or underfunded school systems to colleges, where social and intellectual expectations are frequently drastically different, may be difficult for many individuals.

Some argue that affirmative measures alone are not sufficient and need to be supplemented by deep structural change. In the book "Romani communities in a New Social Europe," Ryder, Taba, and Trehan argue that significant changes are necessary to support young people's involvement in transformative change based on the principle of 'nothing about us without us.' They propose a broader concept of social Europe that prioritises equality, dialogue, redistribution, and respectful recognition of all minority perspectives.³¹ According to Dunajeva, some Roma members may not complete primary or secondary education due to feeling unwelcome and even bullied in schools, while others identify structural racism in academia.³²

³⁰ Lajčáková 2013.

³¹ Ryder–Rostas–Taba 2014.

³² Dunajeva 2017: 56.

Despite these obstacles, various initiatives are emerging to promote the Roma narrative. The Roma right (2/2015): “Nothing about us without us,” journal of the European Roma Rights Centre that grew out of a three-day gathering of Roma and pro-Roma activists and thinkers in Budapest in 2014, is one such initiative. The journal contains critical papers written by established and emerging activists and scholars in three sections: Activism and civil society; knowledge production; gender and LGBTQ issues. The founding editors of the journal have diverse personal and academic backgrounds, with each conducting their doctoral studies on topics related to the oppression and emancipation of Roma in diverse disciplines such as art history, media studies, political anthropology, political science, and sociology.³³

Moreover, higher education may seem like a luxury product when so many Roma members struggle to complete primary or secondary education. By prioritising equality, dialogue, redistribution, and respectful recognition of all minority perspectives, a new social Europe could help underpin greater progress.

The Central European University (CEU) has been involved with the Roma population for a long time and has played a crucial role in the development of Romani Studies. In March 2016, the university announced the ‘Roma in European Society’ program (RES), which is a €5 million multidisciplinary initiative aimed at improving the situation of the Roma population in all sectors. The program supports graduate education, innovative research, teaching and leadership development, professional training, and community outreach activities.

In 2004, CEU launched its ‘Roma Access Program’ (RAP) to help Roma students transition from undergraduate to English-speaking graduate programs. The aim of RAP is to promote academic excellence among Roma university graduates, strengthen their Roma identity and pride, and ensure their success in international master’s degree programs in English by promoting their academic excellence in core subjects such as “English,” “Academic Writing,” and “Academic Speaking,” as well as a chosen subject from the humanities and social sciences.

Students who participate in this program take part in workshops with Roma and non-Roma activists and academics on topics related to Roma identity and mobilization. They also receive personalised advice on how to find and apply for English language MA programs and scholarships.

CEU’s work in the field of Roma Studies has faced resistance under the leadership of students, scholars, and activists. However, their efforts have been successful in the reorganisation of the Roma Studies Summer School with the involvement of Roma directors, faculty, and students. They have also established a journal that defines

³³ van Baar–Kóczé (ed.) 2020.

the field and challenges the continued marginalization of the subject by scholars, politicians, practitioners, and experts.

The interdisciplinary nature of Romani Studies and the political atmosphere of anti-Gypsyism in Europe can be linked to the continued emergence and growth of mostly young female activists who are university-educated. Programs like those at the CEU, equip them with the knowledge to fight for social justice and for economic, legal, and political reforms, as well as wider political change.

Recently, we have witnessed the effect of broader decolonization efforts across North American and European universities in the field of Romani studies. The establishment of a European Roma Institute (ERIAS) for Arts and Culture in 2017 and the rise of social justice groups like Black Lives Matter have played an inspiring role.³⁴ The launch of an innovative intellectual and technological university for Roma in the form of the 'ERIAS Barvalipe' online Roma University (CEU) in 2020 was a response to the pandemic and the need for new knowledge production.

In addition to CEU's and ERIAS's work, numerous non-governmental organisations around Europe strive to increase Roma's access to and achievement in higher education. These groups offer Roma students who are subjected to systemic injustices academic support, activism, financial aid, and mentorship such as Romaversitas in Hungary, Roma Education Fund (REF), Upre Roma in Romania and Phiren Amenca internationally.

The debate over positive discrimination to benefit Europe's Roma community is important, but limited consideration has been given to Roma perceptions or experiences in academia. As part of my research, I am interested in evaluating the relevance of Critical Romani Studies, as well as the leadership and arguments of the emerging band of Roma scholars.

Cultural shock/cultural trauma and resilience

Culture shock is a complex experience that can occur when someone moves to a new and diverse cultural environment. When we travel or relocate to a new social and cultural setting, we lose the familiar signs, symbols, and customs that help us navigate everyday situations³⁵. These cues include things like when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people, how to manage tips, how to make purchases, when to accept or decline invitations, and how to interpret statements. They are all part of our culture, just like our language and beliefs. However, when we enter a foreign culture,

³⁴ Matache 2020.

³⁵ Thompson 2021.

most or all these cues disappear. This can leave us feeling lost and disoriented, and we may experience feelings of depression and anxiety as we adjust to an unfamiliar way of life.³⁶

Not everyone goes through cultural shock the same way. Some people may go through these stages faster or slower than others. This is especially true for those who are highly assimilated and/or come from assimilated ethnic families that have cultural capital. In addition, some people experience cultural shock in a more intense way that develops into cultural trauma. Cultural trauma can have long-term effects on an individual's emotional health and can cause feelings of estrangement, identity crisis and psychological distress.

Resilience refers to the ability of an individual, community, system, or organism to withstand and recover from challenges, adversity, or setbacks. It involves adapting, bouncing back, and maintaining functionality even in the face of difficult circumstances or disruptive events. Resilience is often associated with the capacity to effectively cope with stress, adversity, or trauma and to emerge from such experiences stronger and more capable.³⁷

Resilience is not a fixed trait; it can be developed and strengthened over time through self-awareness, learning, and practice. People can cultivate resilience by building their skills in areas such as emotional intelligence, communication, problem-solving, and self-care. Developing resilience can lead to improved mental and emotional well-being, increased capacity to navigate life's difficulties, and a greater ability to thrive in the face of adversity.

The literature in psychology differentiates between two kinds of resilience, "Group Resilience" which is the collective ability of a community, an organisation, or a social group to overcome, recover from, and thrive in the face of significant difficulties or adversity. It refers to the strength, resources, and networks within the community or group that allow its members to manage stress and function. Group resilience is based on shared values, standards, and social relationships that promote cohesion and cooperation in the face of challenge. Examples of factors that contribute to group resilience include strong social networks, effective leadership community cohesion, accessibility of resources and support services. Community resilience emphasises the need for interventions and strategies at community level to build and reinforce resilience among its members. While "Individual Resilience" refers to a person's ability to resist and overcome challenges, trauma, and stressors, often in the context of their own life experiences and personality traits. It focuses on the mental, emotional, behavioural, and physical factors that allow individuals to adjust positively to adversity

³⁶ Xia 2009.

³⁷ Festinger 1957.

and maintain their overall well-being. Individual resilience includes optimism, self-reliance, adaptability, problem-solving, and access to support networks and coping strategies.³⁸ In exploring the experiences of Roma academics and their coping mechanisms, culture shock and resilience are key terms.

Discussion: cultural shock revisited – class marginalization

Research into Roma culture shock in higher education, lack of cultural capital and value of resilience and other coping mechanisms can be justified by similar lines of investigation being applied to other marginalised groups such as low-income students.

Recently, selective undergraduate universities have taken steps to increase their economic diversity by seeking out applicants from underprivileged backgrounds³⁹, prioritising socioeconomic diversity in admissions.⁴⁰ However, prior research indicates that low levels of economic and cultural capital among disadvantaged undergraduates impede their capacity to successfully navigate and integrate into their institutions.⁴¹

On college campuses, class marginality takes several distinct but connected forms. One effect of socioeconomic marginality is “culture shock,” which describes “the strangeness and discomfort marginalised students feel when they matriculate”. In order to determine how class marginality hinders undergraduates’ assimilation and integration, researchers also look at students’ sense of fit⁴² sense of isolation or difference, and sense of belonging. Aries and Seider look at how lower-income undergraduates’ capital deficits are highlighted by their collegiate environment.⁴³ They demonstrate how working-class undergraduates at top colleges experience intimidation from and different experiences from working-class first-year students at public schools.

Based on comprehensive interviews conducted with a racially varied group of forty-four working-class college students from two private colleges, a study conducted in the United States examined the social dynamics that working-class students describe having with their wealthier counterparts, especially their buddies. It has been observed that peers from working-class backgrounds exhibit classism. People from lower class origins are treated in a way that devalues, discounts, excludes, and separates them; this is a manifestation of class privilege and power known as classism.⁴⁴

³⁸ Scott–Kraimer–Heslin 2016.

³⁹ Rimer 2007.

⁴⁰ Karabel 2005.

⁴¹ Torres 2009: 883–90.

⁴² Bergerson 2007.

⁴³ Seider 2005.

⁴⁴ Langhout–Rosselli–Feinstein 2007.

Racial marginalization has been the subject of prior research on the Black undergraduate experience.⁴⁵ However, most recent studies use class-based or intersectional methods. Such a class-based strategy is supported by Torres, who claims that Black students are being pushed to the outside of campus life by social class disparities, especially at institutions that have historically served wealthy students.

A study by Dr. Anthony Abraham Jack from Boston University emphasises the social and cultural circumstances of class marginalization, in contrast to other research that linked the experiences of lower-class undergraduates with marginalization to their class background. Not all Black undergraduates from lower-class backgrounds feel the strangeness, unfamiliarity, and loneliness that comes with enrolling in selective universities. To paraphrase Sampson and Wilson, the full impact of class marginality was only felt by individuals who moved through and engaged with environments that were “ecologically dissimilar” from the elite college milieu.⁴⁶ To further investigate ecological dissimilarity, Jack investigated the relationship between students’ pre-college experiences in various ecological niches and their perception of integration and adjustment to college.⁴⁷

I concur that knowledge of socioeconomic class is essential to comprehending the social experiences of Roma academics. However, I contend that class marginality and culture shock are determined by the social and cultural contrasts between an individual’s pre-college and post-college lives. This research on Roma academics not only broadens current conceptions of class marginality but also contributes to the understanding of the relative importance of class and culture in collegiate stratification processes. The research can also be said to have an intersectional quality probing the impact of low income, gender and ethnicity on Roma culture shock as it also considers how the Roma community itself might marginalise educated Roma. The literature suggests that some traditional Roma communities view highly educated Roma as assimilated and no longer Roma or living in contravention of Roma traditions.⁴⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, an examination of the cultural shock and trauma experienced by Roma academics in higher education reveals the significant impact of systemic barriers, cultural dissonance, and social exclusion on their identity formation. This research

⁴⁵ Feagin–Hernan–Imani 1996.

⁴⁶ Sampson–Wilson 1995.

⁴⁷ Jack 2014: 460.

⁴⁸ Liégeois 1998: 46; Gheorghe 2013: 77.

underscores the vital role of resilience, both as a personal and collective resource, enabling individuals to effectively confront and navigate these challenges.

Moreover, institutional support through affirmative actions and inclusive policies acts as a crucial mechanism for alleviating discrimination and fostering a genuine sense of belonging. The combination of resilience and robust institutional support not only empowers Roma academics to overcome obstacles but also facilitates the development of a dynamic and empowered identity, transforming them into influential agents of change within their communities and beyond.

By addressing these important themes, the study makes a compelling case for the necessity of equity-driven interventions in academia, providing valuable insights into how higher education can become a transformative space for healing, growth, and identity development for marginalised groups.

The evolution from the term “Victim” to “Resilient” among Roma academics underscores the remarkable strength and resilience that Roma communities exhibit in confronting the challenges they face daily. This shift is not just a semantic change; it is rooted in a deep understanding of the historical and ongoing oppression experienced by Roma. For centuries, Roma individuals have been subjected to discrimination, persecution, and marginalization across Europe and worldwide. Despite these adversities, they have successfully preserved their cultural identity, social cohesion, and fundamental rights.

This narrative transformation moves us beyond victimization, focusing instead on empowerment, resourcefulness, and resilience. By highlighting resilience, we also promote solidarity and support through the powerful sharing of stories that showcase strength. Roma activists are dedicated to building alliances and fostering support among allies and stakeholders, both within the Roma community and beyond. Such collaboration not only mobilises vital resources but also ignites activism and forges partnerships to tackle the systemic barriers that Roma face.

Overall, the emphasis on resilience within the Roma academic community reflects a larger movement toward strength-centred approaches to social change. It showcases the assets, capabilities, and inherent resilience of marginalised communities as crucial drivers of empowerment, justice, and meaningful transformation. This compelling focus challenges existing narratives and inspires a shared commitment to creating a more equitable future for all.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acton, Thomas 1998: "Authenticity, Expertise, Scholarship and Politics: Conflicting Goals in Romani Studies." Professorial Inaugural Address, University of Greenwich, London.
- Acton, Thomas 1974: *Gypsy Politics and Social Change: The Development of Ethnic Ideology and Pressure Politics among British Gypsies from Victorian Reformism to Romany Nationalism*. London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bauer, Martin 1996: "The Narrative Interview: Comments on a Technique of Qualitative Data Collection." *Papers in Social Research Methods - Qualitative Series*, vol. 1. London: London School of Economics, Methodology Institute.
- Beck, Sam, and Ana Ivasiuc (ed.) 2018: *Roma Activism: Reimagining Power and Knowledge*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. Berghahn Books. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvw04ch1>
- Bergerson, Amy 2007: "Exploring the Impact of Social Class on Adjustment to College: Anna's Story." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 20, no. 1: 99–119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390600923610>
- Blum, Lawrence 2020: "Cultural Racism: Biology and Culture in Racist Thought." First published August 29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12370>
- Bojinca, Marian, Diana Munteanu, and Andreea Toth 2009: "Analysis of the Impact of Affirmative Action for Roma in High Schools, Vocational Schools, and Universities." Romania: Gallup Organization, Roma Education Fund.
- Bourdieu, Pierre 1986: "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John Richardson.
- Bracic, Ana 2020: "Roma', Breaking the Exclusion Cycle: How to Promote Cooperation between Majority and Minority Ethnic Groups." New York; online ed, Oxford Academic, May 21, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190050672.003.0003>
- Brooks, Ethel C. 2012: "The Possibilities of Romani Feminism." *Signs* 38, no. 1: 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1086/665947>
- Ciaian, Pavel, and d'Artis Kanacs 2016: "Causes of the Social and Economic Marginalization: The Role of Social Mobility Barriers for Roma." No. 03/2016. EERI Research Paper Series.
- Council of Europe. *Directive 2000/43/EC on Anti-discrimination*. Retrieved June 20, 2025, from <http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32000L0043:en:HTML>
- Druker, Jeremy 1997: "Present but Unaccounted for." *Transitions* 4, no. 4: 23.
- Dunajeva, Ekaterina 2017: "Education of Roma Youth in Hungary: Schools, Identities and Belonging." *European Education* 49, no. 1: 56–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10564934.2017.1280332>

- Aries, Elizabeth, and Maynard Seider 2005: "The Interactive Relationship Between Class Identity and the College Experience: The Case of Lower Income Students." *Qualitative Sociology* 28: 419–443. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-005-8366-1>
- European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. *Roma Inclusion 2020-2021: Survey Findings*, 2021. Vienna: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.
- Feagin, Joe, Hernan Vera, and Nikitah Imani 1996: *The Agony of Education: Black Students at White Colleges and Universities*. New York: Routledge.
- Festinger, Leon 1957: *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503620766>
- Fox, Jon, and Zsuzsanna Vidra 2013: "Applying Tolerance Indicators: Roma School Segregation." *Policy Brief*.
- Fraser, Angus M 1992: *The Gypsies* (The Peoples of Europe). Hardcover.
- Fraser, Angus M 1995: *The Gypsies*. Paperback Bunko.
- Gheorghe, Nicolae 2013: "Choices to be Made and Prices to be Paid: Potential Roles and Consequences in Roma Activism and Policy Making." In *From Victimhood to Citizenship: The Path of Roma Integration*, edited by Will Guy, 41–99. Budapest: Kossuth.
- Guszmán, Gergely 2017: "Overview on Theories of Nationalism: Contemporary Shifts and Challenges." *Pro&Contra: Central European Studies n Humanities* 1. no. 1: 4-20.
- Guszmán, Gergely 2019: "A hős, a grand homme és a mártír fogalmának történetisége és nemzetivé tétele." *Performa* no. 9 Paper: http://performativitas.hu/guszmann_gergely_a_emhosem_a_emgrand_hommeem_es_a_emmartirem_fogalmanak_tortenetisege_es_nemzetive_tetele
- Guszmán, Gergely 2020: "La typologie des héros. Le saint, le héros, le grand homme et le martyr." *Performa* no. 12 Paper: 11 (2020) https://publikacio.uni-eszterhazy.hu/6800/1/011_guszmnn.pdf <https://doi.org/10.24361/Performa.2020.12.11>
- Hancock, Ian 2000: "The Consequences of Anti-Gypsy Racism in Europe." *Other Voices* 3, no. 1 (February).
- Hancock, Ian 2010: "Responses to Porrajmos." Pp. 95–96 in *The A to Z of the Gypsies (Romanies)*, by Donald Kenrick. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hurtado, Sylvia, and David Carter 1997: "Effects of College Transition and Perceptions of the Campus Racial Climate on Latino College Students' Sense of Belonging." *Sociology of Education* 70, no. 4: 324–345. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2673270>
- Jack, Anthony A. 2014: "Culture Shock Revisited: The Social and Cultural Contingencies to Class Marginality." *Sociological Forum* 29: 453–475. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12092>
- Karabel, Jerome 2005: *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

- Kertesi, Gábor, and Gábor Kézdi 2011: "The Roma/Non-Roma Test Score Gap in Hungary." *American Economic Review* 101, no. 3: 519–525.
<https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.101.3.519>
- Kóczé, Angéla 2015: "Political Empowerment or Political Incarceration of Romani? The Hungarian Version of the Politics of Dispossession." *The Hungarian Patient: Social Opposition to an Illiberal Democracy*: 91–110.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9786155225550-010>
- Lajčáková, Jarmila 2013: "Temporary Equalizing Measures: A Unique Opportunity to Finally Promote Roma Inclusion." *Minority Policy in Slovakia* 2.
- Langhout, Regina, Francine Rosselli, and Jonathan Feinstein 2007: "Assessing Classism in Academic Settings." *The Review of Higher Education* 30: 145–184.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2006.0073>
- Lee, Ken 2000: "Orientalism and Gypsylorism." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 44, no. 2: 129–156.
- Liégeois, Jean-Pierre 1998: *School Provision for Ethnic Minorities: The Gypsy Paradigm*. Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press.
- Majtényi, Balázs, and György Majtényi 2020: A Transnational Nation. Roma National Identity in the Making. In: *Agency in Transnational Memory Politics*. Ed. by Aline Shierp, Jenny Wüstenberg. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv21hrqfv.18>
- Makszimov, Vlad 2020: "Data Reveals 'Shocking Hardship' of Romani People in Western Europe." *Euractiv*, September 23. Retrieved June 20, 2025, from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/non-discrimination/news/data-reveals-shocking-hardship-of-romani-people-in-western-europe/>.
- Matache, Margareta 2020: "It is Time Reparations are Paid for Roma Slavery." *FXB Center Blog*, October 6. Retrieved June 20, 2025, from <https://fxb.harvard.edu/2020/10/06/op-ed-it-is-time-reparations-are-paid-for-roma-slavery/>.
- Matras, Yaron, and Daniele Leggio (ed.) , 2017: *Open Borders, Unlocked Cultures: Romanian Roma Migrants in Western Europe*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315295770>
- Matras, Yaron 2015: "Roma Culture: An Introduction." In *Roma Culture*, Project Education of Roma Children in Europe Project, Council of Europe. romafacts.unigratz.at/index.php/culture/introduction/roma-culture-an-introduction.
- Morley, Louise, Andrzej Mirga, and Nadir Redzepi (ed.) 2020: *The Roma in European Higher Education: Recasting Identities, Re-Imagining Futures*. London: Bloomsbury.
<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350109667>
- Müskens, Wolfgang, and Anke Hanft 2009: "Design of the International Comparative Study." *Continuing Higher Education and Lifelong Learning: An International Comparative Study on Structures, Organization, and Provisions*: 15–22.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9676-1_2

- Rimer, Sara 2007: "Elite Colleges Open New Door to Low-Income Youths." *The New York Times*, May 27 1.
- Roma Education Fund. "Roma Inclusion in Education." Position Paper, October 20, 2010. Retrieved June 20, 2025, from www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/roma_inclusion_in_education_position_paper.pdf.
- Rostas, Iulius, and Andrew Ryder 2012: "EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies: Insights into Empowerment and Inclusive Policy Development." In *Gypsies and Travellers*, 1st ed., 187–206. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.46692/9781847428967.012>
- Rostas, Iulius 2019: *A Task for Sisyphus: Why Europe's Roma Policies Fail*. Budapest – New York: Central European University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7829/9789633863190>
- Rozzi, Elena 2017: "Roma Children and Educational Exclusion in Italy." In *Realizing Roma Rights*, edited by Jacqueline Bhabha, Andrzej Mirga, and Margareta Matache, 17–38. Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812293876-002>
- Ryder, Andrew Richard, Iulius Rostas, and Marius Taba 2014: "Nothing about us without us': The Role of Inclusive Community Development in School Desegregation for Roma Communities." *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 17, no. 4: 518–539. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2014.885426>
- Ryder, Andrew, Marius Taba, and Nando Trehan (ed.) 2021: "Introduction: Romani Communities in a New Social Europe." In *Romani Communities and Transformative Change, a New Social Europe*, 1–33. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.56687/9781447357520-005>
- Ryder, Andrew 2018: "Chapter 4. Paradigm Shift and Romani Studies: Research 'on' or 'for' and 'with' the Roma." In *Roma Activism: Reimagining Power and Knowledge*, edited by Sam Beck and Ana Ivasiuc, 89–110. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781785339493-008>
- Said, Edward 2003: *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. 3rd ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin. (Originally published in 1978, with a revised edition in 1991).
- Seibert, Scott E., Maria L. Kraimer, and Peter A. Heslin 2016: "Developing Career Resilience and Adaptability." *Organizational Dynamics* 45: 245–257.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2016.07.009>
- Sway, Michael 1984: "Economic Adaptability: The Case Study of the Gypsies." *Urban Life* 13, no. 1: 83–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0098303984013001005>
- Thompson, Carol 2021: "The Origins of 'Culture Shock', Part 1."
- Torres, Kimberly 2009: "'Culture Shock': Black Students Account for Their Distinctiveness at an Elite College." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32, no. 5: 883–905.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701710914>

- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. *The State of the World's Refugees: A Humanitarian Agenda*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Van Baar, Huub, and Angéla Kóczé (ed.) 2020: *The Roma and Their Struggle for Identity in Contemporary Europe*. Berghahn Books. <https://doi.org/10.3167/9781789206425>
- Van Baar, Huub 2014: "The Emergence of a Reasonable Anti-Gypsyism in Europe." In *When Stereotype Meets Prejudice: Antiziganism in European Societies*, 27–44.
- Wiggan, Greg, Michael B. Pass, and Shawn R. Gadd 2020: "Critical Race Structuralism: The Role of Science Education in Teaching Social Justice Issues in Urban Education and Preservice Teacher Education Programs." *Urban Education*, July. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920937756>
- Xia, Jing 2009: "Analysis of Impact of Culture Shock on Individual Psychology." *International Journal of Psychological Studies* 1: 97–101. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijps.v1n2p97>