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Self-Image and the Image of the World in the Eyes of Young Roma in Poland[1]

Abstract : The article addresses the subject of self-image and the image of the world held by Roma youth living in several Polish towns. The study had a qualitative character and was conducted through the use of personal interviews. The researchers spoke to a few dozen young girls/women and boys/men from local Roma communities in Wałbrzych, Płock and Bydgoszcz. These communities are both settled Carpathian Roma (Bergitka Roma) and the representatives of a more traditional group of the Polish Roma. Interview analysis reveals that despite the strong traditions and cultural standards accepted in Roma communities, the youth demonstrate increasingly open attitudes towards the "majority society". They begin to discern the importance of self-development and education, possess predominantly positive self-esteem and declare their intent to pursue a wide range of interests and personal talents. Their optimistic vision of the future is connected with emigration plans or plans related to a temporary, economically motivated migration abroad. All young Roma declare the adoption of important Roma values, such as Roma identity, respect for the elderly, and family. At the same time they accept the value of education, lucrative jobs and the chance for individual development as made possible by the contemporary world.

Key words : the Roma, youth, Roma students, traditional Roma culture, self-image, image of the world

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Tradition and cultural transformations in the 21st century among Polish Roma

The romantic image of a Gypsy, a free man travelling along with a camp, playing music, wearing a colourful outfit, has always evoked a certain nostalgia in Polish society. This nostalgia is often coupled with both curiosity and extreme emotions. At the same time, the Roma have "always" been at the lowest level of social hierarchy due to their poverty, linguistic and cultural distinctness as well as the jobs traditionally undertaken and types of subsistence strategies implemented (Różycka, 2009).

"*Romanipen*", an unwritten code obligatory for all true Gypsies, is a moral and ethical set of rules followed by the majority of Roma and is not available to non-Roma people. "*Romanipen" is an interpretation of Gypsy tradition. It imposes on the community an obligation to manifest the Gypsy identity as the highest value, to use the Romani language [...], maintain solidarity with other tribesmen, the obligation to help, to follow the accepted ceremonies and rituals*" (Bartosz, 2004: 170). Transgressing the prohibitions entails sanctions, in extreme cases: exclusion from the community. Various groups of Roma/Gypsies have a different attitude to *romanipen*. Some are more liberal in their interpretation of and adherence to the code, others exercise severe punishment for breaking Roma law.

Another important element of Roma culture is the leadership of elders. During meetings, younger family members should not speak without the acceptance and approval of the elders. All signs of disobedience, or lack of respect, are an indication of misbehaviour and a failure to uphold Roma tradition. What is naturally associated with advanced age is the concept of lifelong experience, and hence: wisdom. The belief in this organically developed wisdom is based on one's success in managing reality despite a lack of formal education, profession or employment. As a consequence of the reliance on the experience and wisdom of the elders, no pressure was put on the creation of a young layer of intelligentsia among the Roma. In contemporary times, the experience of elders and the knowledge inherited from ancestors are not broadly applied.

In Gypsy communities women play an important role – they manage the household, look after children and act as guardians of hearth and home. Despite women's significance in Roma culture (an important role is played by older

women: grandmothers, mothers, mothers-in-law) a patriarchal model dominates. It is usually the husbands who obtain the means to support the family. A traditional Roma woman (Romni) is subordinate to her husband. The emphasis on the great value of family is characteristic of Gypsy culture. It is important for the family to be large, even the most distant cousins are included in the family circle. During family gatherings, e.g. weddings or funerals, subjects of conversation include distant uncles, aunts and various loose kinship connections. Traditional Gypsies marry predominantly within their circle (group, clan), it is more rare to choose partners from other Roma groups and even rarer still to marry a non-Roma partner. Gypsy marriages are to a large extent arranged by parents. Wedding celebrations follow a traditional ritual and despite the fact that the marriages frequently lack any legal status (e.g. due to the fact that newly-weds are underage or the lack of official or church ceremony) their high value is dictated by custom. The obligation to give birth to children and look after them, which is innate to a gypsy woman's role, is among the main obstacles on the path to education. Giving birth at a young age, Gypsy women are often deprived of the chance to obtain even elementary education. A mature Roma girl attending school may be suspected by her community of immoral behaviour, particularly considering the fact that she cannot be accompanied by guardians as Roma custom dictates of unmarried women.

Children are highly valued in Roma families. They are allowed to do considerably more than children from the "majority society". Among the privileges of young age is an absolutised freedom as well as a lack of discipline or "self-limitation". The unrestrained methods of upbringing can cause problems in the Polish school environment. Gypsy children have problems with systematic work, resistance to temptation, and waiting for rewards (delayed gratification). Learning is a repetition of various activities, which are often monotonous and unattractive to the Roma students in the context of school reality.

Roma students are rare in Polish schools. The Roma minority is not populous, with approximately 20 thousand people among a Polish population of 38-million. For many years it has been said (opinions of NGOs: the Centre for Citizen Education, The Roma People Association in Poland) that Roma students are discriminated against, perceived as problematic, thought to cause "educational difficulties", misunderstood by peers and teachers and are frequently referred to special schools. On the other hand, Roma specialists and leaders stress the

low motivation of Roma parents to encourage their children's formal education in Polish schools. The uniform and prescriptive nature of school activities have become a threat to values adopted at home, and are ultimately perceived as a threat to Roma cultural identity. Compulsory school attendance is also connected with effort on the part of parents. In Roma families with many children, taking children to school, making sure they do their homework and being present at parents' meetings is a nuisance and a sacrifice. The unwillingness to send children to preschool has the same roots. Additionally, the cultural role of the Roma woman, as one who looks after the house and children, imposes a rule to keep children close to home. By sending a child to a preschool, a Romni/Gypsy woman can be perceived by her community as a lazy mother who is not attached to her child.

The belief in Roma people's superiority over non-Roma people as well as the ban on contacts with some outsiders resulting from *romanipen*, manifest themselves in social isolationism. Traditional Roma people do not go beyond the frames of their community, due to both their own unwillingness to assimilate and to their marginalization by the majority. This creates a vicious circle which limits the chance for the integration of Roma youth with a wider social environment, thus impeding the road to development.

Roma students in the Polish Education System. Roma education assistants

Social research shows that the level of education of the majority of Roma in Poland is defined as low. In the older generation illiteracy is common. Approximately 70% of Polish Roma children regularly attend schools. Children are not sent to preschools due to tradition and lack of financial means, and as a consequence they are not sufficiently prepared to begin primary education thus falling behind their Polish peers. Another problem is the low material status of many Roma people, which does not allow them to equip children with school accessories to meet – at a later stage – their educational needs. The multigenerational, overcrowded flats do not provide proper conditions for learning, while school is not perceived as a friendly place by either children or parents. It also happens that children are discouraged from attending school due to mistreatment

by their peers. Roma children used to study in segregated classes for Roma students the aim of which was to prepare them for education in regular schools with the Polish student population. Roma classes, organised by a priest of the Roma, Stanisław Opocki, aimed to equal the level among Roma students, to catch up with school backlog or acquire selected basic school skills (reading, writing, counting). However, such classes had numerous drawbacks and were criticized by educational activists and Roma leaders for creating a ghetto.

In 2004, a governmental Programme for the Integration of the Roma Community was developed in Poland as a response to such numerous problems (negligence in education and health, unemployment, living on the cost of social security, poverty). One of the elements of the Programme was the creation of the position of a **Roma education assistant** (a person from the Roma environment, usually a Rom/Romni) whose assumed task was to improve the students' school attendance and grades in those locations with the largest Roma communities. It was accepted that the first, basic responsibility of the assistant would be to oversee Roma students' attendance at school and influence Roma parents to send their children to school systematically throughout the school year. Another task consisted in observing the children's education and searching for possible subjects or parts of class material which required later revision, or called for additional explanation during compensatory classes. The assistants' duties were also to include direct work with Roma children in a school day room – accompanying children in their homework and signalling problems to teachers of particular subjects. Moreover, the Roma assistant was to fulfil the function of a caretaker (a guardian) reacting to displays of discrimination against Roma children as well as mediator between Roma families and schools. It is apparent from this cursory review of the duties of Roma education assistant's that this professional role is an immense challenge (Soszka-Różycka, Weigl, 2007).

An analysis of Roma education assistants' experiences (there are about seventy of them in Poland) at initial and further stages of their work allows us to understand what this occupational role really consists in, what challenges and gratifications are connected with it and what advantages and changes it might introduce to the Roma environment. As the interviews conducted by Robert Bladycz (Bladycz, 2009), a long-standing chairman of the Roma Education Assistants Association indicate, at the beginning of their professional career the assistants faced scepticism, even reluctance on the part of the pedagogical

staff and school management. Their negative treatment by the formal peda-gogical personnel was dictated by a fear that the teachers would be "observed during their work". A person from outside (in addition, a Rom/Gypsy!) enter-ing the school premises and observing the teachers' work in this way evoked a sense of threat and a concern that the hitherto working style would have to be changed. Roma assistants were often individuals who finished their educa-tion at the level of primary, lower secondary or secondary vocational school. Teachers perceived cooperation with such people as a blow to their status and competencies. With time, most Roma assistants have earned a better position and ultimately respect in their school environments. The process of entering the profession was a battle not only for Roma students' rights but also for their own rights and equal treatment as educational staff. Robert Bladycz mentions the asymmetry in the endeavour to reach an agreement. As far as relations with Roma children are concerned, all assistants admit to positive experiences. Students are pleased to have support from their own cultural environment at school, a trusted person who provides them with a sense of security. According to the Roma etiquette which dictates respect towards elders, children address the Roma assistants as "aunt" and "uncle". Roma students value their opinion, which, as a consequence, gives the assistants a sense of satisfaction and ful-filment. Another element which is important in the Roma assistants' work is contact with the students' families. The majority of Roma families express sat-isfaction and learn, through the assistants, to cooperate with school. Thanks to Roma assistants parents learn to value school and education, they begin to visit schools more frequently and have greater trust in teachers (Bladycz, 2009). In some environments problems arise among Roma parents where there is lack of acceptance for the effort invested into children's education. Some Roma peo-ple are still convinced that formal school education is unnecessary. A consid-erable amount of time and devotion is necessary to convince them that school guarantees a better future for their children. Similar problems are mentioned by a brilliant Roma education assistant from Elbląg, Iza Stankiewicz: "Roma children's parents pose the greatest problems. I think that it is with them that one should begin the education". The assistants' mission is to facilitate a future life in dignity for Roma children. Stankiewicz mentions her desire for the Roma image in Polish society to change, to allow Roma children the chance for a full education and a happy life. She also hopes that one day, one of her students

will continue the work that she began (Stankiewicz, 2011). The work of Roma assistants entails numerous difficulties and a high level of personal devotion. Sylwia Maroń, a Roma education leader and assistant from Wałbrzych, writes about the many challenges connected with working in this position. The main problem is the assistants' low salary which barely surpasses social security benefits or statutory, welfare based income. This reduces motivation and leads to high turnover which is definitely not advantageous to Roma children. Lack of serious treatment of Roma assistants by officials and employers can still be observed, they are not guaranteed permanent employment contracts and they are forced to demand their rights, for instance to participate in training sessions or conferences (Maroń, 2011). As the married couple Marlena and Tadeusz Bosman Krzyżanowscy, the excellent assistants from Bydgoszcz write, their working hours significantly exceed the assumed full-time job, the assistants frequently work after hours in the field, visit Roma families and intervene in many situations. Work starts at 7 in the morning and often finishes at 10 at night. They devote their free time to write grant applications and fundraise for Roma children's needs. Assistants are left unaided and do not receive adequate support (Krzyżanowscy, 2011). The message which emerges from the majority of Roma assistants' statements is that their work has a "charitable" or "selfless" character, demands sacrifice, sleepless nights, is stressful, and additionally does not bring financial satisfaction. However, the effort which the assistants invest in their work with Roma children is worthwhile. All Roma assistants see the fruits of their work. First of all, Roma children's school attendance and grades improve, which is also noticed by teachers. The Programme for the Integration of the Roma Community in Poland distributes textbooks and school accessories to Roma children. This mitigates any shame previously felt at school and allows children to attend classes with pride. Bladycz observes transformations in the attitudes of adult Roma people who are more willing to send their children to school and view education as a chance for their children's development. Roma students are less apprehensive about school, they are more eager to attend it and more willing to come into contact with their Polish peers. An increasing number of Roma children receive scholarships (Bladycz, 2009). The recognition and the sense of being needed motivates the assistants and provides them with strength for further work. A Roma assistant's work gives a profound sense of meaning (Stankiewicz, 2011).

A bilingual, bicultural student in Polish schools

Bicultural and bilingual students are a powerful source of knowledge and new experience in school environments. At the same time, encounters of students from diverse cultures provoke various problems which can obstruct the work of teachers who are unprepared and evoke mutually negative emotions among peers and their parents.

In Poland the number of foreigners is constantly increasing, as is cultural diversity; an increasing number of children belonging to cultural and ethnic minorities are beginning to attend Polish schools. Along with the growing cultural diversity in educational institutions, social expectations concerning multicultural education have begun to develop. Experts have raised the alarm that "while the various legislative activities respond to this diversity at least to a degree[2], social practice definitely falls behind" (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al, 2011).

Among important questions concerning bicultural students' education is their linguistic competence. In case of the Roma, who have lived in Poland for dozens of years, *Romani* language is the children's first language (mother tongue) which they use in their family circles. Polish is their second language, and Roma children have contact with it mainly in the context of school, or in contact with their Polish peers. Krystyna Wiercińska, a special pedagogue and methodology advisor in the area of multicultural education (Wiercińska, 2013), stresses that students who have a limited vocabulary range do not understand orders and statements, experience friction with peers and teachers, are reluctant to attend school and have difficulties with knowledge acquisition. The lack of Roma children's linguistic competencies and additional lack of understanding of the nature of the problem among teachers, leads to numerous linguistic and cultural misunderstandings. Roma children are often treated as less intelligent than their Polish peers. A common practice among teachers is to reduce the demands and devote less attention to Roma students who – quite to the contrary – need additional motivation to learn. The failure to stimulate children's motivation and a disregard for students' progress on the part of teachers can lead to passive attitudes in Roma children, and consequently – a decrease in attendance, which is still a significant problem among Roma students. Cognitive deficiencies in

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[2] The Order of the Ministry of Education of 17 November 2010 on various forms of support for children with special educational needs and the operation of public psychological-pedagogical counselling centres.

Roma children result, to a large degree, from a lack of adequate preparation to education. Roma children are not sent to preschools, which play an important role in the acquisition of new linguistic, social and cognitive competences.

Another psycho-pedagogical problem lies in diagnosing school readiness and cognitive development of Roma children with unreliable diagnostic tools which are not adapted to study bilingual children. Children with insufficient knowledge of the Polish language who do not fully understand the orders of the diagnostician as well as those with deficiencies in cultural experience are often diagnosed as children with intellectual deficiencies and referred to special needs schools. In her publication on diagnosis in the context of multiculturalism and multilingualism, professor Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska and her team suggest that "with a low level of linguistic competences or a low level of the knowledge of the Polish language, it is necessary to select nonverbal methods in such a way as to maximally reduce the influence of language and foreign culture on final grades, which will allow the accurate and reliable assessment of the child's actual cognitive functioning and potential" (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2013). This recommendation is often not followed in psychological-pedagogical counselling centres, taking into consideration the striking overrepresentation of Roma children in special needs schools.

As we have already mentioned, wisdom in Roma culture is tantamount to cleverness, life skills are passed on from generation to generation. In Polish culture, emphasis is placed on formal education validated with certificates and diplomas. Educational achievements are valuable in themselves, but they also serve to to guarantee a prosperous future. In Roma students, who function on the border between two worlds, an internal conflict may develop. The difference between the values transmitted at school and the family and traditional values leads to a situation in which the child is faced with a difficult choice: "Who is right?", "What is my identity?" (Wiercińska, 2013).

Psychological research with the Roma – methodological problems

A number of limitations in academic research with Roma communities result from the specificity of this group. The Roma are an ethnic minority which isolates itself and is usually isolated by the "majority society". The Roma isolate

themselves from the non-Roma population to preserve the cohesion of their group, they fear the pollution of their culture by the majority culture, they are reluctant to discuss their customs, traditions and language. Revealing certain information to a non-Roma person can even be perceived as a betrayal of one's cultural environment. This generates difficulties and at times even an impossibility in selecting a willing and representative group for research. It is necessary for the researcher to be on friendly terms with the Roma community (which, in turn, is an unfavourable condition for psychological research) or to be introduced to the environment by members of this group, ideally those who enjoy a status of authority. Another problem in studying Roma children and youth can be the necessity to receive the permission for research not only from the person concerned, but also from parents and elders, whose opinion is highly respected in the community.

There are few examples of best practice in researching Roma children and youth. Usually, conclusions are drawn on the basis of data acquired in small groups, frequently diversified with regard to age. In such cases the study has a descriptive and exploratory character. The attempts to research the opinions of young Poles' and young Roma's about each other can serve as a rather unfortunate example (Weigl, Formanowicz, 2007; Bladycz, Prusakowski, 2007). One study of Polish youth involved over 100 students, while in the study of Roma youth the sample consisted of only 10 people and due to a lack of potential, interested study subjects the sample could not be extended.

The most frequent method employed in studies on Roma communities is interview or observation. Romani language is a non-standardized, colloquial, non-academic language. It has numerous dialects. Questionnaires adjusted to the needs and abilities of Roma respondents are not developed in Poland. Diagnostic interviews and conversations also have their limitations. They are also dependant on the respondents' linguistic skills. Researchers have to demonstrate patience and stay alert in order to adjust their language to the level of the respondent, to avoid using technical, difficult vocabulary in order to enable the interviewee to understand the context of the question and feel comfortable in the specific asymmetric relationship: researcher-respondent.

Results of author's own research. Interviews with young Roma from three Polish towns

The interviews analysed in the article are a fragment of a broader research program concerning Polish-Roma relations in several Polish towns[3]. The fragment analysed in the article refers to Roma youth – their self-image, self-esteem, life plans, sense of identity and quality of life. Opinions on the subjects mentioned above have been acquired during individual conversations which were based on focused, qualitative interviews. The conversations were conducted in the respondents' town of residence (Płock, Wałbrzych, Bydgoszcz) by four researchers experienced in contact with Roma communities. The interviewees were thirty young Roma individuals between the age of 11 and 21 who agreed to participate in the study. In the case of younger children, permission was also received from parents. The research sample was obtained through purposive sampling which is the most typical method of non-probability sampling. It consists in a subjective selection of researched individuals in the hope of acquiring the broadest and most complete information possible. To invite the young Roma to participate in interviews, the researchers contacted Roma education assistants or Roma leaders from particular towns, who provided assistance with outreach.

The interviews were conducted in 2013 and 2014 in the interviewees' flats or separate locations, e.g. local Roma day rooms. The students were always accompanied by a family member or a day room caretaker. The duration of the conversations varied and depended on the interviewee's readiness and abilities. The shortest interview lasted 15 minutes, the longest an hour and a half. All respondents who took part in interviews focused on several key subjects. The interviews were partly structuralised, the conversation topics were defined, however, due to the specificity of the group, their character was closer to a casual conversation between two persons. The conversations were conducted individually with each respondent. The questions could be elaborated by the researcher or certain themes could be omitted. In each case the aim of the conversation was as follows: "The conversation concerns the situation of children and youth in your town. We are interested in your personal opinion. The conversation is completely voluntary and the acquired information will be used strictly for

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[3] Research in Żywiec, Płock and Bydgoszcz.

research purposes and the development of educational programs for children and youth. Do you agree to speak and record our conversation?" If consent was received, the conversation was continued:

- What is life like here, in your town?
- What is good about this place?
- What is missing, and what would be useful?
- What is burdensome? What do you have problems with?
- Do people live in harmony here?
- What is life like for you here? Please describe your experiences.
- Who are you, how would you define yourself? Are you a Roma, a Pole, or both?
- What do you value in Roma/Gypsies? What good is there in their presence here?
- Is there anything you value in non-Roma people, in Polish people?
- Is there anything negative in contact with other Roma?
- Is there anything negative in contact with non-Roma people, with Polish people?
- Tell me about yourself. What are you like? What can you do well? What do you have problems with?
- Can you tell me something about your school, friends, family…?
- How do you see your future?
- What are you going to do? Is there anything you dream about?
- Where would you like to live? Would you like to live here? Do you link your future with this region, or perhaps a different town, a different country?
- How happy are you? How happy were you in the past? What about the future?

All conversations were recorded, transcribed, and finally listened to by two people treated as competent judges. During their discussion, the judges ascribed the content expressed in the recording to five previously determined thematic groups. The analysis consisted in matching the information from the interviews to the determined categories (areas), as well as a discussion on the psychological mechanisms observed in the conversations.

The analysed categories are:

- self-image
- the image of school and education
- the image of Polish people

- the image of the Roma
- values
- a vision of the future

A collective analysis of young Roma people's self-image and their image of the world

Self-image

The respondents vary in sex, age, place of residence and experience. The differences are also evident in their self-image.

The sense of identity is the key category for analysis. Roma youth are raised in two environments: family- Roma and school or professional– Polish environment. All young people interviewed felt Roma and identified themselves with Roma culture. Several children from mixed families also declared Roma identity. One of the boys, whose mother is Polish and the father is Roma, despite being brought up and educated in Polish environment, also believed himself to be Roma. He declared that "there is nothing to be ashamed of, it is the person who is important, regardless of his or her origin".

All interviewed young people met the requirements of the *romanipen* code which dictates pride in being a Roma/Romni.

The youth from two of the analysed towns identify with their town, they are satisfied, sometimes proud of their place of residence. These young people know their towns, they have ideas about what can be done to improve their lives. They declare that they have their families and friends there and want to live there permanently. Despite their acceptance of their towns, nearly all Roma allow the possibility and declare their desire for temporary leave abroad for work purposes. The majority of young Roma living in the third of the analysed towns would like to leave and find a permanent place of residence abroad. Such statements as "there are no opportunities here" appeared in many interviews. Two respondents, despite their present stay and education in Poland, declared that "England was their home". In the declarations of all interviewed girls and boys there appears a motif of a journey, of moving from one country to another and a distinct lack of any fear of "migration". This agrees with the traditional,

nomadic lifestyle of the Roma, albeit adjusted to contemporary times and dictates. An important factor which favours the desire to emigrate is a more distant or even close family living outside Poland. The belief in family support is also an expression of a significant Roma cultural standard.

A vast majority of the young Roma interviewed revealed healthy self-esteem. Roma youth declared satisfaction with life and a sense of happiness at high to moderate levels. Those few who are only fairly satisfied with life believe that the situation will improve in the future. Among the strengths listed by youth are musical and vocal talents, achievements in sports and good grades. The interviewees spoke of success in various competitions. They self-defined as determined, independent, willing to help others. One of the young respondents informed us that he could notice a positive change in his attitude since a wife and child appeared in his life: "only now am I responsible and an adult, I work, earn money, manage in life". One of the younger respondents compares herself to the majority of Roma and – unlike them – she believes not to be lazy. She describes herself as a calm person who does not have any problems with acclimatization, she also feels to be tolerant. Thanks to these qualities she has friends of various origins. Among the interviewees we also met a very ambitious Roma teenager who took an independent decision to continue his education. Presently, he attends a general secondary school and works part-time as a manual labourer. He works hard to develop himself, achieve something in life and change the perception of the Roma: "Let them see. An educated Gypsy", he says. He is surprised with teachers' attitudes towards gifted Roma students as a rare phenomenon. He believes that a person should not be perceived through the prism of cultural affiliation.

Among the main interest of the interviewed boys is football. One of the students "developed his talent" in a local football team, however, due to unfamiliarity with the Polish environment he was frightened and resigned. After a certain period of time, having been persuaded by the coach, he returned to training. Another interviewee, musically talented, is a lector in a church choir. There is also a passionate reader among the young Roma. Other interests of boys include do-it-yourself activities and singing.

Girls spoke most frequently about singing and dancing. Their passions are strongly rooted in Roma culture which prides itself in such domains.

Commenting on the respondents' statements it can be concluded that the interviewed Roma describe themselves in a similar manner to the majority of

their Polish peers. They are satisfied with themselves, believe in their talents and chances, their self-image sometimes has a "wishful thinking" character. What is an interesting ascertainment is the significantly greater diversification of boys' and young men's statements compared to girls. Their descriptions had a more individual and personal character. Girls' self-descriptions were more consistent with the Roma cultural norms (dance and vocal interests, the future role of a wife and mother).

The image of school and education

School is the main contact point for Roma and Polish culture. It is at school that Roma children form relationships and contacts with Polish people.

A significant part of the interviewed youth self-describe as having good grades. As Roma education assistants from the particular areas claim, these statements are frequently not reflected in reality. Interviewees signal a desire to continue education in a technical, general secondary, vocational school or to start vocational training and university education. Some young Roma adolescents observe that school provides knowledge about the world and its history, prepares students for adult life and provides a chance to achieve success. The youngest like school on account of contact with peers. They are also fond of their teachers who help and support the students and sometimes even joke. For some Roma students a teacher is a trusted person with whom problems can be shared. In the case of one of the older boys it was a female teacher who motivated him to learn and pursue education at a secondary school. His results in lower secondary school exams were good and in light of this the class teacher provided him with support and motivation. He mentioned that if he had not tried, he would have regreted it. Some interviewees comment on the important role of school day rooms where they receive help with homework and have an opportunity to participate in events and trips. Boys often speak about following their passion for sports within school walls. One of the boys is constantly motivated to work by his coach. Some students attend additional singing lessons. One of the young Roma says: "I didn't find it more difficult than *gadjo*[4],

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[4] A gadjo- a non-Roma person.

I am equally treated because I behave differently from other Roma people". In several interviews there appears, so untypical of this culture, a critical attitude towards the traditional Roma environment.

Among the young respondents there are also individuals who do not manage well with school duties and are not promoted to the next class. The problems concern foreign languages, Polish language, mathematics and history. One of the boys says: "School exhausts me, I don't want to attend it". Several students informed us that they were not very successful in school education. For some, the obstacle lies in the feeling of shame which in turn leads to a loss of motivation to continue education, while some admit that they do not have time to study. A young Roma girl had problems in lower secondary school which coincided with her father's death. She was held back from promoting to the next grade twice due to excessive absence. She also had negative experiences in lower secondary school with her schoolmates. After transferring to Voluntary Labour Corps[5] she noticed an improvement. Now she has good grades, she finds education easier and is better treated by teachers and peers.

The respondents also included individuals who had extremely negative school experiences connected with their Roma origins. One interviewee described the dishonest behaviour of a teacher, a lack of individual approach to students as well as unfair grading. One of the boys reported a fear of a particular teacher. Apparently in situations of conflict with non-Roma peers, the teacher failed to intervene on his behalf. In the situations of provocations on the part of the Roma, the teachers' reaction was reversed, they "interceded" on behalf of Polish students. One of the respondents reported that he had been poisoned by his classmates and as a result of this attack he spent time in hospital. Pedagogical staff did not punish the perpetrators in any way. In several cases, similar situations forced the students to change schools in hopes of better treatment.

One female Roma student details an experience of rejection by Polish peers who harassed her to impress their schoolmates. As she says in the interview: "the girls didn't pay attention to my feelings". The Polish female students did not react to Roma assistants' corrective remarks. Another interviewed girl reported that although she had not been discriminated against, she noticed that other

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[5] Polish: Ochotniczy Hufiec Pracy, OHP, a state-run organization aiming to prevent social exclusion of young people.

Roma students faced attacks from Polish people. One girl faced unpleasantness from her classmates, but the class teacher came to her defence.

The above-mentioned illustrations reveal the complex and unstable situation of Roma students in Polish schools. The students' experiences depend on the local social situation and behaviour as well as the individual teachers' initiative. Good experiences are connected with the teachers' individual approach to a particular student, their support and a belief in students' motivation and talents. Bad experiences are linked to anonymity, stereotypical treatment of Roma children and their being perceived through the prism of a simplified image of the entire group.

A specific, but crucial issue raised by a young Roma in one of the interviews was connected with the practice of sending children from Roma families to special schools in order to receive allowances and other social benefits. As one young Roma claims: "a desire for interim profit closes the road to a better future for a child".

The image of Polish people

The image of Polish people as a group which is foreign in the eyes of Roma youth has its positive and negative undertones. Some respondents mention acts of discrimination and racism. Part of the youth heard epithets directed at them referring to their skin colour and origin. Acts of provocation and physical aggression directed at Roma boys have also occurred.

One of the respondents observes that the word "Gypsy" pronounced by a Pole has pejorative connotations, particularly when it is used by an uneducated person. Another interviewee says: "A Pole doesn't respect another Pole, how can he respect a Gypsy?" One of the Roma respondents is not surprised that the Roma are treated as inferior. "Polish people don't like the fact that the Gypsies receive social benefits, instead of learning and working", "A Gadjo is not worse". One of the interviewees admires people working with the Roma and for the Roma, at the same time believes it to be "Sisyphean work".

The majority of Roma youth report a lack of Gypsy-Polish problems and speak freely of positive interaction with Polish peers. One of the Roma girls declares that her best friend is a Polish girl.

The subject of the description and evaluation of Polish people did not arouse great interest among the young Roma respondents. Their statements were short

and they did not elaborate on the topic. No signs of visible emotions were noticed in this fragment of the interview. It appears that the young Roma girls and boys treat the environment of non-Roma peers as a natural element of social milieu. No signs of isolationism, hostility, "dividing the world" into one's own and the foreign world were displayed during the interviews.

The image of the Roma

Reflections on the Roma people's own group form a complex image. The youth believe that among the Roma there are both good and bad people. Some of them steal, others are decent people. Only one respondent critically stated that the Gypsies did not follow any rules, "they stay close, but when an opportunity arises they will steal from each other". On the other hand, he observed that some Roma did not approve of such behaviour, even when a Polish person is the victim. One of the boys said: "When someone is good to the Gypsies, we are good to them."

An important element of the image of the Roma in the eyes of the young representatives of this community is the lack of education and the attitude to work. The "majority society" often perceives the Gypsies as lazy and uneducated. Young Roma people's opinions do not differ significantly (which is surprising!) from the perception of this group by the Polish majority. The interviews abound in statements referring to the lack of education among the Roma, which translates to their poor living conditions. One of the respondents stresses the contradiction between lack of money and having too many children in Roma families.

Critical opinions appear mainly in the interviews with older, almost mature Roma youth. They indicate a belief that the Gypsies as a group are lazy, do not pursue education and do not work. These mature youth believe the Roma lack ambition and do not see the world or their lives with any future perspective. They state that many Roma do not feel the need for self-realisation and are closed. Finally, they feel that many Roma are eager to receive social benefits, which generates dislike for them among Polish people. The Roma, as one of the respondents observed, "try to get any job to have income, most frequently they are satisfied with national average salary which is not able to cover the costs of living of a family". It is difficult to say whether the cited opinions are an expression of a passing "rebellion of the youth" and the hypercriticism directed at the

older generation which is so typical of Polish culture, or whether they indicate a real desire for change and an opposition to the traditional lifestyle which does not agree with the aspirations of youth.

Taking under consideration the highly positive perception of family in Roma culture, it was to be expected that family relations seen through young respondents' eyes would be close. The information acquired during the interviews is consistent with cultural models. The majority of the respondents declare strong bonds and good relations with their family as well as support from their parents. Two younger girls mention numerous conversations with their mothers about "women matters". Good relations with siblings are also reported. One of the boys who attends general secondary school feels that his family is proud of him and receives constant support: "no one encouraged me to learn, but at the same time no one thwarted my ambitions". In one of the families in which the mother is Polish and the father is Roma, the traditional Roma code is not followed. However, the mother learned Romani language and everyone at home speaks both languages. The parents work and manage well although they live on the border of two worlds. They do not live in a Roma neighbourhood.

A subject which is worth addressing are the young Roma's personal role models. Fathers were most frequently mentioned by boys as authority figures. One of the most pronounced examples of this kind of positive, patriarchal role model is a Rom (a Polish woman's husband) whose son expresses a very flattering opinion about his father. He views his father as a role model because "unlike the majority of Gypsies he doesn't receive social benefits, he works hard. Feeling tired is alien to him". Thus, the father serves for the son as a model to follow.

The majority of Roma girls find their role models in mothers, Roma assistants, Roma artists, as well as female teachers and pedagogues who provide them with support and help as well as a sense of security and understanding in a school environment.

The vision of the future

The majority of the interviewed Roma see their future abroad (temporarily or permanently). England was named most frequently as a future place of residence, followed by Germany. Roma youth believe that it is easier to find

employment abroad and moreover, minorities are less discriminated against. Among arguments for migration there is also family living abroad.

Poland provoked contradictory opinions. On the one hand, "bleakness, lack of opportunities, fear that nothing can be achieved here", on the other hand, a sense of belonging: "I was raised here and I got used to such a town". One of the respondents declares a desire to remain in Poland, but wishes to move to a bigger city. Lack of attachment to the place of residence is consistent with nomadic cultural models of the Roma who have frequently shifted their home-steads. The young Polish Roma also remain "citizens of the world".

As far as professional career is concerned, the respondents present varied approaches and concepts. Some of them want to finish the compulsory lower secondary school and start working directly after graduation. Their occupa-tional preferences are not defined. They only want to work to earn a living. Others have specified plans or dreams concerning future professions. The occu-pation which was most frequently cited by girls was that of a hairdresser. Other professions included beautician, chef, dancer, singer, as well as lawyer (prob-ably without reliable knowledge about the occupation: "I could be a lawyer or a hairdresser") and finally pedagogue who would help the Roma "in some association". The boys spoke about various visions. There is a plan of becoming a professional athlete. Another boy sees his future among the clergy, perceiving priesthood as his life's role. Another Roma secondary school student wishes to pursue an interest in humanities and in the future would like to do something he enjoys. He plans to study psychology and after university to work in a psycho-logical-pedagogical counselling centre.

The young Roma, both boys and girls, do not rush to start a family. The declared age at which they would like to set up their own family ranges between 20 and 25, and the maximum number of children they desire is four. A young Roma girl reports that her mother "chases boys away and it is good this way". She "would like to experience youth before entering adulthood and setting up a family". Another interviewed girl would like to have a Polish man as a hus-band. One of the boys says that his priority is "to achieve something in life first, in order to support the family". For another respondent, Roma or non-Roma origin of his future wife is of no concern, he cares about the quality of the rela-tionship. He claims (like a traditional Rom) that he would support his family himself, that the wife would not have to work. Another respondent, already

married, says that he would like his wife to find employment as well and his son to "achieve something" in life.

In the matter of happiness the young express themselves with high hopes. However, there are concerns about satisfaction with life in the future. Adulthood is perceived by the young Roma as rife with responsibility and duties. They are afraid that they will not manage financially or find employment. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents believe that the future will be favourable to them.

When asked about dreams, the youth give various answers. Some of them dream about developing their talents, becoming famous football players, starting a music band, becoming singers, dancers in a Gypsy band, or solo performers at festivals. Others dream about independence, their own home and starting a family, a good job and happiness.

Values

A predominant value mentioned by the respondents was the family of origin and one's own family in the future. For instance, the majority of young Roma declare that they would share lottery winnings with the closest ones, with parents, siblings and grandparents. One of the boys declares that he would share the winnings with his mother and this way thank her for raising him. A young Roma girl says that she would never be able to argue with her family. The closest family members are highly respected and it is they who are at the highest level in the hierarchy of important figures.

Another significant value for the young Roma is humanity and kindness regardless of one's origin. They appreciate readiness to help, support and closeness. A young Roma girl mentions that she would like to help those who cannot afford to buy bread. One boy says that love is important in life, regardless of one's material status. Another one recalls how his father instilled particular values in him, taught him that one should not steal or lie.

The traditional perception of marriage and youth has evidently undergone changes. In the past, the Roma started families at a very young age, girls became pregnant quickly and entered adult life early. Today the respondents declare that youth and freedom are of great significance to them. Before they set up their own families they want to experience youth. "Everyone has to let off steam",

as one of the young Roma girls claimed. It is important for the young Roma generation to have time to "make mistakes of youth". It is a time of freedom but also of learning from one's own mistakes, a time which allows one to become wiser and evolve in order to take mature decisions.

Self-development was a value revealed in the interviews which is untypical of traditional Roma people. The interviewed youth express a desire to develop their passions and talents. Some of them are determined to pursue a professional path. One of the respondents greatly values religion. There is a repeatedly occurring statement about the significance of independence, as well as the possibility to be self-sufficient. Such values clearly depart from traditional Gypsy standards. The older generation of the Roma used to function communally, did not stress individual career paths much less independence. A rather traditional and patriarchal model of family predominated. Today, a large number of Roma girls attend school. The motif of self-development did not reveal itself among Roma girls as evidently as in the case of boys (the girls were also younger than the interviewed boys). However, it must be mentioned that presently the majority of Roma assistants, Roma scholarship holders and students in Poland are women. The emancipatory movement among Roma women is prominent and significant for this community.

The traditional Roma culture. Capital or burden?

Ewa Nowicka-Rusek (Nowicka-Rusek, 2008), an excellent Roma culture researcher, formulated a surprising thesis that the traditional Roma culture, with its original values, constitutes capital for the contemporary generation of young Roma, not a redundant ballast or burden.

What psychosocial resources does she have in mind? We will briefly signal the author's most important theoretical analysis.

Thesis 1. The adaptability of Roma culture

The adaptability of Roma communities is revealed in the processes of selective adaptation. The Roma have reserved a certain range of social norms exclusively for their own community. Other, less important norms are adjusted to the

conditions and social context, changing depending on time and circumstances. The strength of family and clan bonds ensures the permanence of the core of Roma culture. Cultural contacts with non-Roma people, which the Roma have experienced for centuries, have not led to the breakdown of Roma identity, instead, they have resulted in numerous transformations of Roma culture.

Thesis 2. The mobility and aterritorialism of Roma culture

The Roma have never built their community on ties with a particular territory. The tradition of nomadism is an important element of Roma social consciousness. Migration is not a problem of psychological nature as a geographical place is not important either for fulfilled social roles or for an individual's identity. In contemporary Europe the ease of migration, mobility and lack of emotional limitations when leaving yet another place of residence greatly facilitates their functioning.

Thesis 3. The clan and tribal character of Roma identity

The Roma used to be bound and are still bound primarily by blood ties – a clan community. An individual derives his or her prestige and social position from affiliation with a particular family. In the face of the Roma's supranational mobility, family and clan bonds gain a new meaning. The possibility to create a supralocal network of relations which is based on the possibility of finding completely trustworthy individuals in various locations in the country and around Europe is an enormous and unique social and cultural capital of the Roma.

Thesis 4. Tribal divisions (clan, caste)

In contemporary democratic structures the problem of Roma communities' representation is revealed with an increasing clarity, and consequently, the problem of their unity and collectivity. The "caste" division into orthodox and more liberal Roma groups is a phenomenon which impedes the emergence of supratribal representation which could accept the task of expressing the needs of the entire community. Nowicka-Rusek supposes that the Roma unity faces two paths: the first one is the breakdown of *romanipen* and a liberalization of the requirements of the most orthodox groups in the name of practicality.

The second path can lead to the reinforcement of *romanipen* in groups which earlier did not follow the rules of the code rigidly.

Thesis 5. Internal integration versus isolation from outsiders

The Roma have always lived their own life, scattered or isolated from majority societies. Living among other nations they ignored the outside world, although they absorbed certain cultural elements. Today television and the Internet provide the Roma contact with the majority culture since early childhood, while school practically forces one into such contact. If educational projects and programs aiming to reinforce the sense of ethnic value among minority groups are accepted and introduced to school curriculum, it is school that can become an important medium of Roma cultural values and the sense of their community, as well as their place among other ethnic and national groups.

Thesis 6. The Roma's supranational Europeanism

The Roma have never pursued a state organism which could be the basis for a collective organisation and protection of their interests. Currently, along with a local level of activities, a regional, countrywide and international level of political agency has appeared which is very efficient at transcending the national and state level of social organisation. Nowicka-Rusek claims that the lack of their own statehood makes the Roma a prototype of a supranational ethnic collectivity – a type of supranational Europeans.

Thesis 7. The position of an ethnic minority

One of the elements of the social capital which the Roma owe to themselves is the status of an ethnic minority in European societies. The mere fact of holding this status results in possession of rights which the Roma minority use skilfully. The Roma have a right to protect and develop their own culture, also at the level of the system of education. A collectivity which is not bound to one country or one state organism becomes a prototype of modern consciousness and identity. The status of a supranational collectivity which makes similar demands and generates similar problems in all locations, endows the debate about the Roma with a unique significance. This alteration in discourse is accompanied

by elements of concrete political action – with the appearance of organisational structures which deal with the problem of minorities and the so called small nations. Among them, organisations working for the Roma minority play an exceptionally important role.

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Oana Rognean*

Exploring Resilience in Children from Families of Low Socioeconomic Status

ABSTRACT : Children who develop in unfavourable contexts, in backgrounds marked by low socioeconomic status and associated risk factors (Stansfeld & Clark & Rodgers & Caldwell & Power, 2011), would be expected to display precarious development and poor adaptation to life's demands (Rak & Patterson, 1996). However, despite the unfavourable premises, many of them demonstrate positive adaptation and adaptive functioning (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012), with resilience being the concept that can explain the adaptation mechanisms (Rutter, 2005).

The purpose of the present paper is to investigate resilience in children who come from families of low socioeconomic status, and to explore the ways in which children who face adverse life situations adjust to them with the help of resilient resources and competencies. Sixteen children were invited to interviews at a social day care centre. As a result of the in-depth interview and thematic analysis, twenty-one categories of strategies that children used emerged, which we grouped into six major themes: behavioural coping, cognitive coping, emotional coping, avoidant coping, social support and organisational support. The results indicated that children appeal to a variety of coping strategies in order to make their way through difficult situations, using them differently in accordance with the gravity or the importance of the situation.

Understanding the way resilience manifests itself in these children is of utter importance for creating and implementing programs adapted to the children's needs, programs that target the development and the improvement of resilience both at an individual and an organisational level.

KEY WORDS : resilience, children, low socioeconomic status

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Introduction

Children who develop in unfavourable contexts, in a background marked by low socio-economic status and associated risk factors (Stansfeld & Clark & Rodgers & Caldwell & Power, 2011), would be expected to display precarious development and poor adaptation to life's demands (Rak & Patterson, 1996). However, despite the unfavourable premises, many of them demonstrate positive adaptation and adaptive functioning (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Many studies have been conducted in the past few decades with the purpose of highlighting the factors involved in these adaptation mechanisms (Dumont & Provost, 1999; Newman & Blackburn, 2002; Hamill, 2003; Boyden & Mann, 2005; Black & Lobo, 2008; Kolar, 2011; Lee & Nam & Kim & Kim & Lee & Lee, 2013). Findings have pointed to the concept of resilience, as representing "reduced vulnerability to environmental risk experiences, the overcoming of a stress or adversity, or a relatively good outcome despite risk experiences" (Rutter, 2006), a "relative resistance to environmental risk experiences, or the overcoming of stress and adversity" (Cicchetti & Rogosh & Lynch & Holt, 1993). Resilience has been regarded lately as a process in which individuals facing different levels of stress or adversity manage to overcome or navigate through them experiencing a low (or functional) level of negative effects and recovering well to baseline functioning (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

When discussing resilience, there are at least two important factors that should be considered: exposure to risk/stress, and positive adaptation. Because both the risk/stress exposure and the positive adaptation can only be evaluated subjectively (different levels of stress have different impacts on different individuals, and positive adaptation can be quantified differently according to the characteristics and potential of a person) (Ungar, 2003), in the present study we adopted a positive approach (Sheldon & King, 2001) and a cognitive conceptualization, viewing resilience as subjective well-being related to adaptation in school and peer groups, positive relations with the surrounding individuals and participation in social life.

Theoretical background

The term "resilience" comes from Latin and derives from the word "resiliere" ("re" = re, "salire" = to jump), and the first references date back to 1630. As such, we can translate the term with "jump back in its place" which is

synonymous with the terms "elastic", "flexible". In order to define "resilience" from a psychological perspective, we need to understand the way in which the term evolved and was used in different domains, mainly in science.

From an engineering perspective, a material has resilience if the following 3 assumptions are met: 1. There is a form of equilibrium and this form is the only status defined as normality; 2. The equilibrium is regained only by comparison with a force to which the material resists; 3. The kinds of forces that will act over the material are known right from the beginning (Holling, 1973). If we transfer the concept "resilience" from engineering to psychology, we need to take into account a more flexible definition of the notion. This is achieved by reconsidering the terms "equilibrium" and "normality" and, also, the forces under which the system is capable of regaining its equilibrium. The most plausible reconsideration comes from the domain of economy where equilibrium is constantly redefined in the face of change which it undergoes. This perspective about the level of equilibrium can be related to the development of a person. The changes a person undergoes during his/her existence imply essential modifications and, for each moment, the level of equilibrium is defined in a different way.

The eclectic approach by which resilience entered psychology led to multiple valences of the term. The first psychological studies defined resilience as a positive adaptation of a person to a traumatic context. Presently, it seems that the positive approach to psychology is gaining the struggle for "custody". From the perspective of positive psychology, resilience is not a process which we carry out only when the system deals with intensive trauma. Instead, resilience is used each time we intend to shift from a current status (whatever that is) to a better one (Scheffer et al., 2001, Walker et al., 2004). In this way, resilience becomes the system's capacity to maintain as well as to improve itself in the course of external changes.

Theories about resilience adapted to the characteristics of adolescents and young adults focus on resources and positive adaptation used for the healthy adjustment and development of a person who deals with risky situations (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Most of the definitions given to the resilience of adolescents and young adults mention the same two concepts: experience of adversity and use of protective factors when facing adversity (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar et al., 2000). Protective factors are those which mediate and/or moderate the impact of risk factors over mental health. Despite the fact that literature mentions several hostile (risk) factors, we still do not know

how youth perceive the problematic situations they encounter. Thus, literature reports cases of excessive anger, of anxiety and depression, both for the individuals who have gone through natural disasters and for those who face daily stressful situations, which they perceive as catastrophic (i.e. repeated arguments with family and friends). In this context, the qualification of a situation as averse or of a factor as being risky or neutral is subjective.

The absence of a paradigm to set the limits of the definition of resilience brings about ambiguities related to the differences between resilience and adaptability, positive deviance, emotional intelligence and coping strategies. For a better understanding of the concept of "resilience", we compare it with the concepts mentioned above, focusing on the specific differences between the terms.

- *Adaptability*. No matter what type of adaptation discussed, a person needs to develop capacities to positively adapt to the changes he or she goes through during his or her life. The lifelong development of positive adaptive abilities (i.e. cognitive processes of anticipating risks) implies developing resilience (Martin-Breen & Anderies, 2011).
- *Positive deviance*. The specific difference between resilience and positive deviance is the fact that positive deviance builds its conclusions on comparing an individual with others, which is a normative approach (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). In contrast, the theories about resilience compare the person with himself or herself .
- *Emotional intelligence*. In order to use best the individual and social factors in a problematic situation, first the person ought to consider the complexity of the problem and the emotions they feel. Therefore, without an acceptable level of emotional intelligence we cannot talk about resilience.
- *Coping strategies*. The constant and long-term use of an adaptive coping strategy represents a predictor for the emergence or development of resilience (Martin-Breen & Anderies, 2001).

Fergus & Zimmerman (2005) have also brought several concepts into the discussion on resilience which are related to it, but do not overlap. Therefore, "although each of these constructs is related to resilience, they are also distinct": *positive adjustment* – which is used in reference to an outcome of resilience, for example if there is a measurable healthy development of an adolescent who overcame a risky situation, it indicates he adjusted well to the context, but the adjustment is the outcome, not the process; and *competence* – which is "an

asset (i.e. an individual-level promotive factor) that can be a vital component in a resilience process", but it is only "one of many assets that help adolescents overcome adversity; because resilience models stress the importance of an ecological context, external factors in addition to competence may help youth avoid the negative effects of risks" (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

As our introduction suggests, resilience is not an easily definable concept, and research aimed at finding a common framework in approaching the phenomenon is on-going. Another aspect that increases the complexity of the discussion on resilience is the cultural dependence of the concept. Among the most prolific work related to the cultural dependence of resilience is the work of Michael Ungar, who points out that "by and large resilience researchers have focused on outcomes that are: 1) western-based with an emphasis on individual and relational factors typical of mainstream populations and their definitions of healthy functioning (staying in school, attachments to a parent or a caregiver, forming secure attachments with one partner later in life, non-delinquent forms of adaptation, etc.); and 2) lacking in sensitivity to community and cultural factors that contextualize how resilience is defined by different populations and manifested in everyday practices (Ungar, 2004, 2005; Boyden and Mann, 2005)" (Ungar, 2008). It is important to understand how research has been influenced by a western framework, and the results have been led more or less by standards that derive from such a framework. Therefore, the issue that Ungar and other researchers raise (Arrington & Wilson, 2000; McCubbin, Fleming, Thompson, Neitman, Elver & Savas, 1998, cited in Ungar, 2008) is that resilience should be conceptualised with increased attention to cultural factors, taking into account the way cultural variation and social understanding of different aspects of life influence the idea of what "health indicators" and good development entail.

In the context of a cultural approach to resilience, we consider that the study of resilience in Romania should also be led according to the adequately identified understanding of what it means to "do well" in the middle of adversity or when living under stressful conditions. While there is a lack of studies in the area of resilience in Romania, there is a total absence of exploratory studies investigating what is understood about risk and positive adaptation. This void in research becomes even more significant in a society where the percentage of families living in precarious conditions is 18.5%, according to the National Institute of Statistics (The National Strategic Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion,

2008–2010), the percentage of poor families being greater in rural areas than in urban areas (23.2% compared to 9.4%, according to the "Social Report of ICCV. 20 years later: options for Romania", Zamfir & Stanescu & Ilie & Mihailescu & Preoteasa & Scutaru & Stanciu, 2010). As the report by Zamfir et al. indicates (2010), the rate of relative poverty in Romania in 2005 was 9.4% in the urban area, and the rate of extreme poverty was 2.4%; in the rural area the rate of relative poverty was 23.2% and the rate of extreme poverty was 7.4%; on average, 15.6% of the Romanian population in 2005 was living in relative poverty and 4.7% in severe or absolute poverty. These are worrying percentages, and given these national statistics, it is clear that a large number of children in Romania grow up in families which qualify for the low socioeconomic status label (as the low socioeconomic status is defined in Stansfeld et al., 2011), in a context of high risk exposure, which tends to promote limited rather than functional development. It is important to understand how children who display positive adaptation use strategies to manage situations of adversity. Once we understand the resilience mechanisms, we can develop effective programs to improve the chances and the development of children who face such risks (Luthar, 2003).

Theoretical framework

Socioeconomic status and risk factors

It is generally understood that low socioeconomic status encompasses low family income, parental imbalances or parents with poor physical or mental health, lack of access to education and education undervaluation, reduced employment opportunities or reduced chances to access average wages; in other words, poor socioeconomic status means lack of opportunities and repeated exposure to hardships along the way (Stansfeld et al., 2010). The aggregate of factors that characterise low socio-economic status is called risk factors, and these are factors associated with a series of negative events which affect one's development: early maternity, school drop-out, substance abuse, criminality, increased family stress, abuses, as well as emotional and cognitive deficits (Mistry et al., 2002; Lee, 2003; Dyk, 2004; Orthner et al., 2004; Hutchings & Lane, 2005; Lloyd & Rosman, 2005; Skowron, 2005, cited in Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2008);

moreover, low socioeconomic status increases the probability of developing mental health problems in childhood and adolescence (Rutter & Sroufe, 2000).

Our understanding of the term "risk factor" has changed with time, and lately it has acquired a relative character, because many researchers in the area of resilience (Luthar & Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Rutter, 2006; Werner, 2012; Ungar, 2003) consider that the presence of risk factors does not necessarily determine limited development in children who are exposed to them; these factors can promote or favour the occurrence of psychopathology, unadaptive behaviours or unadaptive strategies to manage difficult situations, but they are not determinant factors, they are predisposing factors. Taking this aspect into account, in the present research we considered risk factors those factors which create the premises for limited development and negative outcomes.

Resilience

Ann Masten defines resilience as patterns of desirable behaviour in situations where positive development or functioning have been threatened to a significant level by adverse experiences or developmental conditions (Masten, 1999: 283, in Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013). According to Ungar (2003), the resilience construct is a rather arbitrary one, as the operationalisation of *adversity* (or risk), of *normal level* and of *psychological and social functioning* is subjective – these dimensions are not universally quantifiable, and the "resilient/non-resilient" dichotomous approach is not adequate in this context. An important aspect in conceptualising resilience is that it is not the harsh life events that determine the individual's success or failure, but rather the way the individual responds to such a situation (Jackson & Watkin, 2004). Anchored in the positive psychology approach (Sheldon & King, 2001), supporting the view that resilience must be seen as an interaction process between the individual's capacities to respond and the adverse situations, the resilience perspective that we suggest is that, in the case of children from families with low socioeconomic status background, resilience manifests itself through adaptation to life's demands, adaptation that impacts the cognitive and affective development, as well as the school and peer adaptation, the interpersonal relationships and the participation in social life, and resilience in each child is the result of a particular combination of competences, coping strategies and engaged resources, according to each child's particularities.

Individual and social protective resources

There are numerous conceptualisations of protective factors in the process of resilience. As different conceptualisations create the framework for different interpretations of results, in this context, when discussing protection from risk factors, we will use the concept of ''resources'' as it implies more the aspect of personal agency (Rutter, 2007). Protection factors can be a static component, certain given assets, while resources can be accessed or not depending on the individual's competence or motivation, therefore marking the dynamic character of resilience. Protective resources are social or individual elements which influence the dynamics of resilience, and their function is to reduce the negative effects of risk factors and to act as buffers against the stress associated with adversity (Cummins, 2010, cited in Craig & Blumgart & Tran, 2011). Largely, in resilience research, two levels where resources are available can be found: the individual level, through individual characteristics (optimism, self-efficacy, self-regulation, life philosophy, rationalisation, etc.), and the social level, through factors related to family and community (a support person inside or outside the family, belonging to a religious group, a support person in a day care centre, school interactions, etc.) (Nasvytiene & Leonaviciene, 2012; Condly, 2006; Greenberg, 2006; Olsson et al., 2003, cited in Kolar, 2011). There is a third level of available resources, specifically the organisational level, which implies access to certain institutional or governmental entities which, at different points, can provide support for someone who is dealing with a difficult life situation. This would mean that, at a given point, the community is equipped with resources that one can access in order to receive support, resources such as hospitals, day care centres, police, schools, etc.

Resilient competences

As human beings we benefit from individual resources, those intrinsic emotional or cognitive features which we can use in the face of adversity, and the environment contains enough external resources that we can access when dealing with difficult situations. However, it is easy to notice how differently people respond to adversity, and while most of them are negatively affected, a smaller

proportion can do well and display a positive outcome. What makes a person resilient is the way he or she manages to use the individual or social resources, their capacity to engage a large array of coping strategies to reduce the stress (Frydenberg, 2004).

Using the definition proposed by Frydenberg (2004), we operationalise resilient competences as the capacity to use the resources to the individual's benefit, managing them in such a way that the negative impact of difficulties is attenuated. Accessing the individual and social resources increases the probability of resilience development.

Objective

The objective of the present study is to explore the individual, social and organisational resources used in difficult life situations by children who come from low socio-economic status backgrounds, and how these resources are used in the manifestation and development of resilient competences.

Method

Participants

In the present study we aimed to explore the individual and social resources that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds utilise in difficult life situations. Participants were children aged 8-13 (2nd to 4th grade), the average age being M=9.75. Sixteen children were invited to be interviewed, nine of whom attend a social day care centre, six of whom do not; we do not have the necessary information about one of the participants. We kept all the children in the study because we are interested in all kinds of resilient resources they use, regardless of their attendance to a social day care centre. All of the children came from low socioeconomic status families, with precarious financial situations (either one or none of the parents employed), with high numbers of family members in the same household, living in poor neighbourhoods.

Instruments and procedure

We used in-depth interviews as a data collection instrument due to its many advantages related to our purpose. It gave us enough freedom to adapt the questions to the children's level of understanding and to their competences; it also allowed us to investigate specific resilient strategies of each child. The head question that we used was "Think about a difficult situation in your life and tell me how you managed to get over it". During the meetings, we reformulated the questions when necessary, ending up with phrases like "How do you react when unpleasant things happen?", "Tell me about situations that you don't like very much and how you react to them", "Tell me about a moment when you had a hard time and how you got through it". In most cases, because the answers were very poor from the beginning, we followed the same pattern of questions, asking children what they thought, how they felt and how they reacted in contact with the life situations they described, so we would have a full image of their cognitive, emotional and behavioural features.

Each child was interviewed individually, the interviewers being part of a team that was trained regarding the in-depth interview. Each interview lasted about 20 minutes, varying between 15 and 30 minutes, and all of them were recorded with the participant's consent.

Results

In order to understand the resilient resources and the coping mechanisms used by children, we utilised the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which guided data interpretation. According to the researchers, the themes do not "reside" in the individuals' narratives, they do not simply "emerge" from the participants' answers, but they have to be found and analysed by the researcher as well as to be understood as a whole, in an integrated context. Therefore, we did not look at the mere evident answers, but we tried to find connections between the themes children tackled and the particular mechanisms that could be identified across their answers. Thematic analysis is characterised by a specific pattern to approach the participants' narratives, therefore we followed five steps in the themes identification process: firstly, we transcribed the data; secondly,

we familiarised ourselves with the data through repeated and thorough reading; thirdly, we selected the words, expressions, paragraphs, which presented a link to the resilience aspects; fourthly, we coded the fragments in such a way that we had an initial code list, which we further grouped according to the similarities or discrepancies, so we could issue a preliminary list of potential items; in the last phase we analysed the interviews again and, using the list of codes, we generated comprehensive and representative themes.

We identified twenty-one categories, which were then grouped into six major themes: behavioural coping, cognitive coping, emotional coping, avoidant coping, social support and organisational support, and some of the categories we extracted were the following: passive behaviour, verbal and physical aggression, locus of control, need for acceptance, forgetting, family support, etc. Some categories were found isolated, appearing in only one participant (e.g.: sports), while others were common among most of the children (e.g.: family support). In the behavioural coping theme, we found the following categories: passive behaviour (inaction when faced with a problem, waiting for it to disappear), physical and verbal aggression (used as self-defence, as a response to threat), crying (in reaction to harsh problems, like death of a relative), behavioural compromise (a behavioural form of the need for acceptance and of the need for maintaining relationships), creative behaviour and sports. In the cognitive coping theme, we found locus of control (mostly external, when the problematic situation was perceived as too difficult to bear), reformulation of reality (through negation, ignoring or rationalisation) and absolutist thinking (placing the self and others in relation to absolute values and norms which should never be crossed). Emotional coping was mostly seen in the avoidance to externalise emotions, the lack of their manifestation in peer relationships, in order to maintain a positive image of the self or to hide vulnerability. Avoidant coping was used mostly through the following categories: sleep (mostly as a reaction to events children cannot control or as a way of attenuating the negative emotional effect), attention distraction (avoiding the confrontation with problems through play, computer games etc.), and forgetting (which gives the children the impression the problem is gone). The fifth theme was social support, which children looked for when facing different life situations – for the less adverse, social support was sought in friends, and for the serious problems, social support was sought in family (the mother being the main support figure). Organisational support was

accessed through school figures (teachers and educators) and through the social day care centre (social educators).

Discussion

In the present paper we have investigated the way children from low socio-economic status families use individual and social resources to develop and manifest their resilient competences. The main purpose of the study was to explore the manner in which children face adversities, through the strategies and resources they use, and in relationship with the subjective or objective difficulty of the situation. Contrary to our prediction, that children from the targeted background would talk about the harsh or difficult life situations they face, most of them repeatedly spoke about everyday challenges and issues, describing situations that would characterise the life of a child from an average, middle-class family. A possible explanation can be found in Emily Werner's investigations (2012): while researching resilience in children who develop in the presence of risk factors she noticed that children in such situations do not perceive them as unusual; on the contrary, living in the presence of risk is the norm rather than the uncommon.

An important aspect that we noticed across the interviews was the variety of manifestations of resilience. Whether the same strategy was used in various situations or different strategies were engaged for a single event, the results pointed at the lack of uniformity of resilience. As research increasingly indicates, resilience should be understood at the individual level, and more qualitative research is especially needed to explore how resilience manifests itself through resilient competences in children from different backgrounds.

As far as the resources involved go, apart from the individual and social resources that were highly used, there was a surprisingly low occurrence of reference to organisational resources. Since most of the children attended a social day care centre, we expected that they would be more aware of the support they can receive through such an institution, or that they make more reference, by extension, to the support they can receive through school. However, our expectation was not met across the responses, which led us to believe that the organisational support is either not exploited enough by the institution itself

– meaning it is not made evident enough by the social workers that children can ask for support within the day care centre – or that children are not taught explicitly how they can benefit from such support, or that children simply do not perceive the centre as a place where they can be helped when they need it. Such a finding should be a signal for institutions that provide services for children, and it should motivate them to create more contexts in which children understand clearly how they can use the organisational resources to their benefit in situations that are more or less stressful.

Since our study was an exploratory one, although we started from the premises that resilience can be seen as a positive adaptation to life's demands, the design allowed us the flexibility to take into consideration other perspectives of the construct. We find it necessary to make such an observation, as during the interviews many children talked about coping strategies that could be easily classified as "unhealthy" or "unadaptive" ones – physical or verbal aggression, even at a low level or used only as self-defence, the external locus of control in situations where the internal locus would be considered the healthy option, etc. Michael Ungar (2008) sheds new light on such situations where the idea of successful development in adverse situations is challenged by the means children use to achieve such an outcome: "It is possible to argue that the child who makes the most out of whatever is available to him or her should be considered resilient even if his or her behaviour does not look like resilience when viewed by members of communities enjoying greater access to health-enhancing resources. In practice, this means that the young man in rural India who joins a paramilitary group to participate in the defence of his ethnic community's right to self-determination may achieve a sense of belonging, personal meaning, experience self-efficacy, gain life skills, a vocation and express his cultural and ethnic identification, all aspects of healthy functioning associated with resilience, through this unconventional, and illegal, adaptation" (Ungar, 2008). In the same way, children in our study who talked about physical violence or avoidance mechanisms in order to reduce tension and to achieve an improved state of well-being might be judged as lacking in "positive" coping strategies, but we stress the importance of treating resilience in relationship with the child's background and the features of his environment, as well as how he or she can access the most proximal available resources.

The difficulties we faced in this study were related to the data collection process. We considered this as being a limitation of the study, in that the children who were interviewed had quite poor abilities to talk about themselves, or to analyse themselves introspectively. This led to poorer first-hand insights into the children's coping strategies, more questions and more clarifications being needed for each child. Another limitation comes hand in hand with the first one, specifically the lack of standardised instruments. As important as the in-depth interview was, we believe that a quantitative instrument to back up the qualitative investigations is always essential in providing more insight into the understanding of how children cope with adversity.

Conclusions

The present study has aimed to explore the way children cope with adversity in a context of risk factors and precarious background. The results suggest a variety of mechanisms used by children, which are differently and complexly accessed according to the situational demands. We have identified six major themes which children bring about in their discourses and which help them cope with the difficult situations: behavioural coping, cognitive coping, emotional coping, social support and organisational support. There is a strong need for resilience research, starting with exploratory studies (in order to understand the factors and mechanisms that are important and relevant for children, from an individual level to the group level), and moving on with designing instruments which facilitate further research and measurement of resilience. We stress the importance of creating programs aimed at the development and optimisation of resilient competences in children, programs that are rooted in the true needs of children and fashioned according to what each child needs for a positive adaptation.

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