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Out of the Shadows: A Young Woman's Journey from Hiding to Celebrating her Identity

Helen C. Collins Ms

Liverpool John Moores University, h.collins@ljmu.ac.uk

Patricia A. Harrison Dr

Liverpool John Moores University, p.a.harrison@ljmu.ac.uk

Marek Palasinski Dr

Liverpool John Moores University, M.Palasinski@ljmu.ac.uk

Marcella (Pseudonym)

Unnamed community development association

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Out of the Shadows: A Young Woman's Journey from Hiding to Celebrating her Identity

Abstract

In April 2019 the UK government reported that little progress had been made to remedy social outcomes inequality between Roma and the wider population, recommending further recognition of Roma, for example in census data, to enable identification of Roma, their needs, and how to meet those needs. In this article we present an account of one Roma woman's journey from hiding her identity to celebrating it. We expose five critical incidents that challenge and mould her sense of identity and career aspiration, with insights into her hopes and dreams as she reflects upon the barriers she faces and attempts to overcome. The narrative enhances understanding of the intersection of experience and ethnic identity formation, Marcella's (pseudonym) case study emerges verbatim through quotes; we do not alter or correct her English. In our exploration, we follow the six classical steps recommended in case study analysis (Yin, 2009) and ground some of the key analytical concepts in Goffman's theories of stigma (1963) and theatrical performances in everyday life. We conclude by identifying key parallels in her experience, relevant regardless of socioeconomic status to further debate on the nature of internalised shame, stigma, and class.

Keywords

Aspiration, Discrimination, Identity, Inequality, Roma, Stigmatised Identity, Talk Analysis

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Roma community of Liverpool Roma Community Support Workers

Out of the Shadows: A Young Woman's Journey from Hiding to Celebrating her Identity

Helen C. Collins, Patricia A. Harrison, and Marek Palasinski
Liverpool John Moores University, England

Marcella (Pseudonym)
Unnamed community development association

In April 2019 the UK government reported that little progress had been made to remedy social outcomes inequality between Roma and the wider population, recommending further recognition of Roma, for example in census data, to enable identification of Roma, their needs, and how to meet those needs. In this article we present an account of one Roma woman's journey from hiding her identity to celebrating it. We expose five critical incidents that challenge and mould her sense of identity and career aspiration, with insights into her hopes and dreams as she reflects upon the barriers she faces and attempts to overcome. The narrative enhances understanding of the intersection of experience and ethnic identity formation, Marcella's (pseudonym) case study emerges verbatim through quotes; we do not alter or correct her English. In our exploration, we follow the six classical steps recommended in case study analysis (Yin, 2009) and ground some of the key analytical concepts in Goffman's theories of stigma (1963) and theatrical performances in everyday life. We conclude by identifying key parallels in her experience, relevant regardless of socioeconomic status to further debate on the nature of internalised shame, stigma, and class. Keywords: Aspiration, Discrimination, Identity, Inequality, Roma, Stigmatised Identity, Talk Analysis

Introduction

Who are the Roma?

I was aware as a young child that they hate us, the Roma, and I was sad that my father hid his Roma identity to keep his job. These two things have driven me to succeed to prove that Roma are equal. (Marcella, December 2018)

The umbrella term Roma is an endonym adopted by the first World Romani Congress in London in 1971. Linguistic and genetic analysis suggests that the Roma are originally a Hindavi people from northern India (Hancock, 2002). Roma are the largest ethnic minority group in Europe, and following EU accession of several Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries in 2004 and 2007, the number of Roma in the UK has grown (Popoviciu et al., 2019).

In the wake of Brexit this group faces an uncertain future. In 2016, The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) highlighted what it called “a triple whammy of risks: uncertainty over their future legal status, rising concerns about hate crime, and a potential loss of EU funding for integration and support services” (p. 4). Uncertainty over future legal status is perhaps the most ambiguous and unsettling aspect, and it is conceivable that some Roma may shield their identity to evade conflict and to safeguard their social and economic position,

in the same way as Marcella's father. In 2018 the European Commission documented the continuing inequalities and discrimination of Roma, and in 2019 the UK government agreed that inadequate progress had been made on addressing the inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) communities. Grouped within the acronym GRT emphasises a relationship between Gypsy, Roma and Traveller that perhaps masks some important differences. Roma gypsies have their roots in India, whilst travellers are mainly of Irish origin, and while both have lived nomadic lifestyles in the past, today most Roma live settled lives spending extended periods in one place, and many travellers are only semi-nomadic.

Ethnic identity derives from a sense of peoplehood within a group, a culture, and a particular setting (Phinney & Ong, 2007). While Roma are not a homogenous ethnic group (Petrova, 2003), many claim a bond with other Roma across and beyond national boundaries, perhaps in part by belonging to a stigmatised identity (Guy, 2011).

We start with a discussion about discrimination of Roma and stigmatized identity (highlighted by Marcella as the two biggest problems facing her community) followed by a description of the project out of which our relationship with Marcella grew and foreruns our methodology. This is followed by Marcella's story organised under six headings: (i) hidden identity, (ii) special seats for Roma, (iii) Roma and negative narrative, (iv) activism, (v) from my heart and (vi) what next? The first five sections refer to critical incidents, and using Marcella's words, shed light on what formed her sense of ethnic identity and encouraged her pursuit of a professional livelihood supporting Roma.

Discrimination of Roma

Across Europe there are countless examples of extreme discrimination of Roma in employment, education, and housing (Brown et al., 2013; Klimovský et al., 2016). We use the term antigypsyism as Marcella's preferred term to denote a specific form of racism directed against Roma: "it covers everything bad that can happen to Roma."

While the Porajmos, the Romani word for the Holocaust, is well-documented, less well known and less well recorded human rights abuses persist across Europe today (Matras, 2014). Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, virtual walls have been erected in Europe that segregate Roma from their non-Roma neighbours (Bobakova et al., 2015). Whole communities continue to be excluded across social domains: children from school, adults from employment, and families from healthcare (Cozma et al., 2000; Koulis, 2003; Hannan et al., 2016).

Antigypsyism in employment has led to a concentration of Roma in low paid and low skilled work, typically in agriculture, warehousing, manufacturing, and construction. In Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, prior to the transition, employment was compulsory for all working age citizens. Most jobs held by Roma were unskilled, and many such jobs evaporated in the first years of the transition, affecting Roma the hardest (Vermeersch, 2002; Hancock, 2002; 2005). Following EU enlargement in 2004, unemployment and discrimination in their home countries has motivated many Roma to migrate. Marcella's family, like others, migrated to escape discrimination and to seek a better life.

In the UK, employers who might otherwise struggle to fill low skilled jobs have broadly welcomed this new pool of labour (Favell, 2008), and since many Roma are concentrated in low paid work, they often work together. As Marcella explains: "Roma work with each other, if there is one Roma in a warehouse there will be many more, that is the pattern, and it makes it less stress."

Stigmatised Identity

Stigma is an attribute that taints and discredits, restricting individuals' full acceptance in society (Goffman, 1963). Pervasive ethno-cultural stigma shapes professionals' occupational experience and identities (Al Ariss et al., 2013). In response to stigma-induced threats, individuals are presumed to engage in identity work, a reactive and constructive response allowing them to fashion current and future self-understanding (Brown, 2017) and "create, adapt, signify, claim and reject identities from available resources" (Brown, 2017, p. 298). Stigma is generally understood as a characteristic associated with an individual or group, that is devalued in particular social contexts, leading to (self) perceptions of those with that characteristic as having tainted, inferior or discounted identities (Goffman, 1963). Goffman (1963) identified three types of stigma or blemishes relating to character (i.e. personality and mental health), body (i.e., visible disabilities), and tribe (i.e., socio-cultural groupings such as race and religion), that manifest through interaction. Such interactionism is based on the assumption that our social interactions resemble a theatrical performance, meaning that people need to act certain roles and sometimes show different emotions than they actually experience in front of their audiences in order to achieve their goals and comply with social expectations. Their private emotions, feelings and opinions are thus usually unavailable to the audience unless the audience can get a glimpse into the exclusive backstage of their private sphere (Goffman, 1963).

A key finding associated with the perspective of stigma as fixed, is that when stigma-relevant stressors are appraised as harmful to one's identity and exceeding one's coping resources, individuals experience identity threat and enact coping strategies to reduce it. Roberts and Bandstra (2012) posit two broad responses professionals use to counter stigma. First is stigma recategorisation, based on self-presentation behaviours to increase social mobility by changing social categories to which individuals have been assigned; this includes decategorisation (deemphasizing group affiliations and emphasising individual traits and attributes) and assimilation (deemphasising group membership and emphasising a more positively regarded group). Second, positive distinctiveness (increasing one's own group status by communicating its value) can be used to counter stigma, as can integration (incorporating social identity into professional image) or confirmation (capitalising on stereotypes to gain desired rewards).

Authors' Context

Our interest in this topic arose out of general research into employability of marginalised groups, particularly newly arrived migrants in the city in which our university is located. Initial findings showed that Roma were especially disadvantaged in the labour market, evidenced in high unemployment and over representation in insecure, precarious low paid work. With funding from our university and working in partnership with a local community support organisation located in the part of the city with the highest Roma population, we established an employment project to enhance Roma status in work. It became clear that poor employment prospects begin much sooner than working age, possibly in early childhood, so with UK government funding we established a project to enhance Roma aspiration and participation in education. The two projects work in unison to improve education and employment opportunities for Roma, and good practice shared with other marginalised groups experiencing similar barriers regionally, nationally, and indeed internationally.

Method

As qualitative research is better suited to exploring lived experiences and individually constructed meanings (Golafshani, 2003; Fusch & Ness, 2015), we agreed that it would be a better tool for delving into the under-researched Roma identity. Whereas top-down survey research on minority identity is proven to deliver insights into group processes (Haslam et al., 2000; Palasinski et al., 2014; Gallova et al., 2018), such as those relating to ethnicity (Resnicow et al., 1999), and gender (Reisner et al., 2014), bottom-up qualitative research (House et al., 2006; Miskovic, 2007) captures unique subjective elements.

To shed more light on how creatively the Roma identity can be constructed by rhetorical repertoires, we chose to focus on the extracts from an interview with one young Roma woman covering her journey from first concealing her background, using it to her advantage and then celebrating it. We met Marcella in 2015 at a community centre where Marcella was the main community support worker, while seeking participants to interview about precarious work. Originally intended solely as a piece of academic research, our partnership with Marcella has grown to include twin projects: Liverpool Roma Employability Network (LREN) and Roma Education Aspiration Project (REAP). This study detailing Marcella's experience has gained ethical approval from the university. During the consent process Marcella was assured that any recording would be kept safely on a USB stick and locked securely. Interviews were recorded, and the findings shared with Marcella at five stages: at the first analysis meeting, after the first analysis meeting, at our regroup meeting post reflection, during write up, and after write up.

LREN was established to bring together Roma, employers, academics, and others in the city who wanted to raise awareness of Roma and ultimately to improve their employment prospects. Through implementing LREN we became very aware that poor employment prospects did not arise at age 16 but were instead rooted in earlier experiences. Roma Education Aspiration Project (REAP) was awarded central government funding and at the time of writing has been awarded further funding. As the name suggests, REAP works with young people to raise aspiration and challenge barriers that thwart their potential. Using Marcella's case study, which facilitates in-depth insights into individual perspectives, allowed us to look into her unique and subtle experiences up-close, and in more detail than a focus group (concerned more with recurrent themes within a group) would have permitted (Baškarada, 2014). We have followed the six proposed stages recommended by Yin (2009): Plan (rationale identification), Design (choosing the appropriate unit of analysis), Prepare (increasing our familiarity with the area), Collect (selecting quotes from the transcript based on their thematic representativeness), Analyse (processing the quotes) and Share (turning our findings into a paper for *The Qualitative Report*), that we detail below:

Plan

We worked with Marcella to plan how and why to share her story and have involved her in planning and decision-making throughout. Roma, owing to their persecuted past, have a distrust of authority and strangers, thus considerable time was invested in building the relationship with Marcella and with the wider Roma community. Several informal conversations took place in the spirit of building rapport and trust before we agreed to work on this study. The earlier conversations paved the way for later questions and enabled valuable time to reflect on the past and issues pertaining to identity meaning such that we made significant inroads informally before we started the formal research process. The whole process of data generation comprised a group interview between two authors and Marcella and follow up one to one conversation between the lead author and Marcella. The group interview included

introductory questions to establish facts such as timelines and location, followed by key question to elicit responses to the following three questions:

What are your earliest memories (positive and negative) of life as a young Roma girl?

What events challenged your sense of your Roma identity?

What were others' perceptions of Roma, and how did you learn about these?

Design

Talk analysis enabled us to work closely with Marcella and hear her story of what different social interactions mean to her and to her family. Talk analysis works from the basic position that social actions are meaningful for those who produce them, and comprise a natural organisation, discovered and analysed through close examination. This was achieved by asking in depth questions that probed Marcella's thoughts about events that had influenced her. As interviewers we were privileged to enjoy such closeness.

Prepare

As well as spending time with Marcella, we have spent considerable periods with the Roma community, while working on the LREN and REAP projects. Time spent with the community has given us unique access and insights to Roma, their way of life, aspirations, and priorities. This has enabled us to compare and contrast our findings with existing scholarship on Roma, and indeed with other marginalised communities.

Collect

We selected the particular extracts based on our collective agreement of their illuminative value and insightfulness. This approach has already turned out to be fruitful in studying interview excerpts with an individual from a culturally related (Roma) background, but from an opposite social spectrum – Indian Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty, who was subjected to xenophobic and racial bullying in the British Big Brother House by English working/social welfare and uneducated class inmates (Palasinski et al., 2011). Although analysis of talk cannot inform us of the individual's thought processes and emotions, it can certainly reveal the consequences of verbal accounts, providing insight into language as a tool for action.

Analyse

Talk analysis enabled us to pick up the interactional contribution that moves the event forward on the basis of that analysis. For example, talking about her early childhood experience of maintaining a secrecy about her father's ethnicity in order to keep his job, stirred up memories of her school days and special seats for Roma, in turn enabling recollections of her treatment at university and the wider treatment of Roma under so-called positive action programmes.

We listened to the tapes, read the transcripts, and picked out themes collectively and individually. After two weeks we all met to discuss the most repeatable and recurrent themes

that emerged and thus their prominence to Marcella's story. Marcella had the final say in theme headings and their prominence.

Share

Turning the findings into a paper for this journal was a decision made collectively by the authors and Marcella. Marcella was happy for her story to be told and did not want to be named as a co-author. We returned to the finished piece (individually and collectively) several times to re edit, re organise and change emphasis. This ensured rigour and importantly, established high trustworthiness in the group effort and in the quality of our research; due to the nature of the group our research represents, this was essential to us.

Findings: Marcella's Journey

Marcella migrated to the UK in 2015 with her family. She spent her early years in the Romanian city of Braila, surrounded by her extended family. Before moving to the UK Marcella worked in Roma support roles in Romania and Hungary. She has a degree in law from a Romanian university and hopes to do the professional law exams in the UK. At the time of writing Marcella works as a Roma Community Development Worker, and lives with her partner and small daughter in the same street as her parents. Marcella's story weaves a compelling narrative around the significance of events and observations upon one's sense of identity and highlights many poorly understood issues. We interweave our interpretive narrative with Marcella's account.

(i) Hidden Identity

Born into a Roma family in 1987, Marcella's memories of a lively Roma childhood are vivid. She considers it fortunate that her parents were very keen on education. Marcella's earliest memories of school are happy, until aged seven when she began to see that others' saw Roma as "stupid and second class and no point in educating." Thus, Marcella makes it clear that Roma are disliked and relegated to the bottom of society; importantly one should notice the implicit stable attribution here – the Roma are portrayed as deserving their plight due to allegedly low intelligence. The attribution is constructed as stable and dehumanising as the society apparently does not see them as capable of improving their social status even when presented with opportunities for career development.

Describing herself as a naturally inquisitive child ("I always wanted to know things, my poor mother!") presents Marcella as someone with an innate thirst for knowledge and someone with a compassionate bond for her mom who was clearly worse off. Marcella's mother worked in the home and met her daughter's inquisitiveness as best as she could while also enlisting her in the library, an institution that was "seen as not for Roma" by many in her neighbourhood. Her love for education grew alongside the felt hostility towards Roma. Shocked by the reaction of non-Roma to her educational success, she recalls they were "challenged because they did not expect the Roma to be good like this," which defies the negative stereotype of the Roma. Commenting about the difference between private and public perception of Roma, Marcella says: "everything in my family and community is good, not always happy but good you know. But it is like the newspaper, TV, schools, and workplaces think so bad about Roma. Where does this poison come from?"

Marcella emphasizes the ubiquity of the negative Roma stereotypes, asking a rhetorical question about their source and attributing some of them to places typically associated with respect and authority.

Marcella's father worked as a driver and in order to keep his job, could not reveal his Roma identity, and this troubled the young Marcella not least as there was an unspoken agreement in the family that they conceal their identity. According to Silverman (2010) this negotiation of identity does not affect how people view their identity but allows for moving between identities to evade conflict. In her father's case it was a strategic move that enabled him to avoid conflict and maintain a steady income: "...my father, he hear bad things said about Roma by his passengers. But he stay quiet. He needed job."

Marcella evokes the acting mask of Goffman (1959) adapted by her driver father forced to suppress his emotions in the face of insults thrown at his ethnic group.

Even today, however, Marcella wonders if the price of avoiding external conflict created more internal conflict for her father. Certainly, for Marcella, it inflamed her then, and still does today:

"...can you imagine not being able to say who you are? Having to keep quiet about something so very important as who you are? For us if we want a quiet life, we keep quiet but inside we are in turmoil. For me it is no choice. I stay quiet and you don't learn about Roma. I am sure discrimination reduce with knowledge."

Here Marcella raises the issue of identity, stressing its key importance and the pain associated with its forced suppression.

(ii) Special Seats for Roma

"At school I was on special Roma seat and not know why. My parents they say learn, learn, learn, just learn. They say it was because I am special, so I feel good (laughs)."

Historically commonplace and even today it is still quite common in CEE countries for Roma children to be assigned to schools for children with special educational needs or assigned to separate classrooms and seats in mainstream schools (Amnesty International & the European Roma Rights Centre, 2017). Referring to her Roma designated school seat, Marcella exposes the "institutionalised racism" (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967, p. 4) in a place that should be synonymous with fairness and meritocracy – her educational setting. She also refers to her parents' determination to motivate her and her own coping mechanism in the form of a sense of humour. Marcella stresses the self-belief instilled in her by her parents and the continuous bond of presence she shares with them regardless of her whereabouts:

I always believe that I can do anything, that whatever I do and wherever I go my parents will be there. That I have them on my shoulder gives me belief in myself and ask why Roma are treated badly and ask what is wrong?

Undoubtedly Marcella benefited from the strong bonds of family support she was enveloped in. John Bowlby (1969) first articulated the significance of strong bonds formed in infancy, such as Marcella's experience, in his work on attachment theory. Bowlby argues that people who form healthy attachments to others are more secure, and this affords defence for an individual throughout life. For Marcella "...outside my home Roma were seen as bad, but I thank my parents every day for showing me the opposite, that we are a good people."

From her first memories, Marcella had noticed how Roma are often scapegoats:

Throughout history the Roma are blamed for this, blamed for that. To me it is not about when Roma do wrong but just when society needs to blame someone, the Roma get the blame, I see it since I was small girl.

Throughout history Roma have been enslaved and treated as non-humans; behavior sanctioned at the highest levels by government and royal families such that it has become learned behaviour in the general population (Matras, 2014). Nowadays scapegoating is fuelled by false reports, as was the case in the UK's Brexit campaign when they built up a "fear and blame" narrative against the Roma (Traveller Movement, 2017). Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic Roma in the European Union were blamed for spreading the virus to others (Walker, 2020). By referring to her early childhood, Marcella dramatizes the scapegoating more vividly, which also underscores its dehumanizing nature that does not spare even small children.

Given this representation of Roma, what is the impact on Marcella and another Roma? If othering is the identification of the self or in-group and the other or out-group, it follows that there might always be a winner and a loser. Although othering is usually undesirable, it can provide a "mirror" (Goffman, 1959), which can be used as a tool to improve understanding of both the other and the self, and the malignant aspects of othering might be avoided. In Marcella's case:

I hear the bad things about Roma, Roma are different all the time. This line Roma are different can make or break. I choose to make. I tell everyone about Roma history, hardworking Roma, work ethics, skills, family bonds, all good things, turn negative to positive. I say in my job Roma are survivors not victims.

(iii) Roma and Negative Narrative

Despite finding it financially challenging, Marcella's parents supported her to go to university where she studied law for four years. She was the first in her family to go to university "I felt, you know what do you call it, away from my comfort place." At university she was marginalised for being Roma and heard negative comments often "daily it was normal." Throughout her degree, she noticed that many of the negative examples were Roma related, for instance "all the people who are in prison, they are Roma."

Sadly, it is true that Roma face heightened discrimination through an association with criminality (Kocze 2018). Nevertheless, Marcella is identifying a form of stereotyping about her ethnic group who are regarded in the same way, deindividuating its members regardless of personality or individual differences.

Whilst struggling emotionally at university, the support of her parents made her determined to be a "professional in the law, however hard it is and be a lawyer for Roma rights." It might be the case that this reflective process and the transformations it brings about laid the foundations for Marcella's later work as an activist. Marcella has observed how some Roma, conscious of the negative manner in which they are regarded, develop a negative sense of identity and become fearful of mixing with non-Roma. For Marcella, interacting with different people has enabled her to see herself and others as both equal and different. The reflective identity (Freire, 1997), can lead to challenging transformations, and in Marcella's case, her current job in the heart of the Roma community connects homes and community to prevent social exclusion, favouring formation of emancipated personal and collective identities, and eschewing otherness in its wake. At the same time Marcella is acutely aware just how fragile life can be for Roma. A negative news story, for instance, can inflame communities and turn Roma into scapegoats overnight. In fact, Marcella suggests that she is always working against a negative backdrop "One day in a week Roma have rights as everyone else, but six days it is a struggle, and the Roma are bad. Drum is always banging; me I take nothing for granted."

(iv) Activism, Reality and Flight

While Marcella's experience of antigypsyism in her early life formed the seedbed for her career, two other observations alerted her to broader antigypsyism. First, through studying law, Marcella appreciated how widespread and institutionalised antigypsyism was. The hostile university environment manifest in separatist practices such as special seats for Roma, coupled with the anti-Roma narrative she studied which reinforced negative stereotypes about Roma found in popular press, fostered her determination to improve opportunities for Roma. Second, whilst she understood that antigypsyism could not be localised to her city, she only understood the extent of discrimination when she moved to Hungary. In Budapest Marcella worked for the European World Volunteering Service (EWVS). She says

I think I had a very big shock in Hungary. My eyes got so open to the worldwide plight of Roma, we are one and we have human rights, we have one history, one persecution. Why don't we have the same opportunities as others?

Exposure to wider antigypsyism and gross injustice influenced her to become an activist for Roma rights. Her activism enabled her to challenge injustices in institutions and processes that governed daily life in education, housing, and employment. She described how she made it: "My job, like, er from my heart, about me, about my family, about my past, about my future." It became "not just my job, but my life. In this way I used my Roma identity to benefit my career, and benefit Roma."

But Marcella became disillusioned. Her work involved collaborating with Roma communities to increase employability skills and awareness of Roma history. Rewarding aspects included the project she organised for the 70th anniversary of the Roma Genocide in the Zigeunerlager (gypsy camps) where upwards of 300 000 Roma were killed (The Open Society 2019). This helped Marcella see why many Roma do not trust authority: "...when you see close up what authorities have done to Roma you see why Roma don't like authorities."

By juxtaposing the Roma and authorities, Marcella also highlights their sense of non-belongingness and otherness, dramatically underscoring their plight.

However, after a few months [of working at the EWVS] on Roma Integration Programs, Marcella began to see the "positive action" programs as very anti Roma and fuelling hatred. According to Marcella they seduced the children with "good food, a fun place to stay ... one fun weekend," and observed volunteers telling Roma children that: "your parents they lie, your parents they – steal things, they are stupid, they don't go to work, Roma are bad." Not surprisingly, this made some children wish to leave the program, with poor retention rates blamed on Roma failure to integrate rather than on the discrimination they felt they had experienced. Marcella was left feeling "so angry, I see all my life Roma brainwashed into hating who they are, made to feel very bad for being Roma."

Marcella observed other positive action interventions fail, and Roma blamed, echoing Matras' (2014) argument that integration often goes hand in hand with control. Disheartened by life as an activist, Marcella returned to her family in Romania:

I was very sad about Roma situation. There is a writer says something my Grandmother - she teach me it goes, "Bitterness is like cancer it eats upon the host. But anger is like fire, it burns it all clean" (Marcella referring to Maya Angelou quote)

By talking about her emotions, Marcella implies that anger, if channelled correctly, may be a source of empowerment and inspiration for a positive change.

(v) From my Heart

Since it is the case that most Roma do not publicise their identity to seek employment (Herakova, 2009), what is it about Marcella that motivates her to align her work with her core sense of identity? Marcella migrated to the UK from Romania with her family, for economic reasons and to be somewhere that “treated Roma better.” Today Marcella works as a Roma Community Development Worker, living and working in the heart of the Roma community that she regards as a privilege. Her job entails supporting Roma and others in the community in many ways: supporting job seeking, benefits support, English classes, housing advice, legal help. Based in a rich multicultural environment such that support aimed at one ethnic group inevitably benefits the wider community, she feels that both her role and the Roma community is still constrained by prejudice, often made worse by authorities more than individuals in their community. She believes that antigypsyism is engrained in organisations and constitutes “institutionalised racism” but remains positive about her impact “I enjoy a special access to my community and love that I am making their lives better.”

Since arriving in England, Marcella believes that she has been fortunate. Acutely aware that discrimination against Roma exists in the UK, she is grateful that it is neither as direct nor virulent as her prior experience. Fiercely proud of her Roma heritage, she wishes to participate in all aspects of community life: “...building community allotments for food, education for Roma, Roma history at museum, sorting jobs, houses, tackling discrimination, I am very busy, my life and work are one with my identity (laughs).” This quote answers the question posed at the start of this section: What is it about Marcella that motivates her to align her work with her core sense of identity?

Like other migrants, Marcella and her family have faced difficulties in their migration journey, such as culture shock and language difficulties (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). Oberg (1960) suggests that common symptoms of culture shock include concern over drinking water and food, homesickness and feelings of helplessness: “...we had all of these, so bad for my grandmother she could not stay. My mother she cried a lot. For me I was angry but busy.” Oberg suggests that the way to recover from culture shock is to get to know people in the host country. However, Marcella has not found building relationships straightforward:

...discrimination is not like direct like in my early life, but it is there in quiet ways. Let me give you example. I want to improve my English so I like to talk to English people, but they don't want to talk to me. Roma are always viewed with suspicion and the media makes it lots worse when it calls us child snatchers and wrong things like that!

Thus, Marcella presents herself as a sociable individual open to cultural integration, although denied this by apparent prejudice, which may be subconscious.

Working and living in the heart of the city's Roma community connects Marcella with other Roma; and she believes that this has helped her family's cultural adaptation enormously. We were led to “holding environments,” that describe the optimal environment for supportive kin environments which for Roma help “cognitive and emotional turmoil give way to meaning” (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 49). For Marcella's family, adaptation was easier through... “having a place that made sense to us, that we could rest our bodies, hearts and minds in, and most important, that we could be Roma.”

The notion of a holding environment extends to the workplace, where a concentration of Roma in low skilled roles means that Roma often work together, with mutual support networks providing emotional satisfaction. Marcella's job, rooted in her social support network, manifests in strong social connectedness:

...sometimes I help a Roma family that have arrived in the city. I am on my phone (laughs) sorting food, beds, even work and putting the man in touch with agency for work and telling them what streets are good landlords and not so good. One man then he tells me good service for Roma in another city and I copy.

This sense of Roma community and mutual help can be clarified by the theory of social support (Norris & Kaniasty, 1996), which explains how mutual help engenders social togetherness and feelings of oneness.

Having witnessed the impact of discrimination against Roma, Marcella is determined to build her career around supporting Roma; at the time of writing she is about to embark on a post graduate diploma in law to enable her to practice eventually as a lawyer. Her ambition aligns with contemporary career research that posits authenticity, balance, and challenge as drivers, with women more likely to craft careers aligned to their personal values (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Marcella confirms her determination to support another Roma:

...I cannot say exactly when, but seeing Roma being treated bad so many times made me be what I am. Big things stand in my mind like my father hiding who he is, Roma families in Hungary being treated so badly, my experience just on the street but it is the daily antigypsyism that drives me now. I celebrate as a Roma and I want others to celebrate too.

(vi) What Next?

We end our conversation with Marcella by moving back and forth between three pressing concerns. First, encouraged by the ability to find work in the UK alongside other Roma has had the unintended consequence of limiting some Roma's ambition to seek better paid jobs. A well-documented finding in social identity literature is that people prefer to interact with members of their own identity group, even when that sometimes means turning down more prestigious or well-paid work (Tajfel, 1982; Abrams & Hogg, 1990). For Roma there is evidence of institutionalized otherness through segregation/ghettoization that keeps them out of mainstream spaces (Matache, 2017). For Marcella:

I fully understand that they are scary of discrimination, but I want them to aspire to higher jobs. But I see that it is only when many do and not just one or two that people have the courage to break out.

Marcella hopes to lead by example and encourage more Roma to aspire to skilled work. Second, she would like greater public awareness of the role of antigypsyism as a barrier to Roma integration. Marcella argues that too often Roma are scapegoats and prevented from reaching their potential because of negative stereotypes bolstered rather than challenged by authorities, and is saddened when she observes professionally qualified Roma not reaping the benefits even when they apply for jobs suited to their experience and education. Marcella provides strong evidence from her own family and shares how educated members are forced to take up lower skilled jobs: "I have cousins with degrees and they cannot get good jobs like

others with less degrees. They work all the time in warehouses or agency work for packing.” Third, and for Marcella most importantly, she is saddened that for some Roma, the price of fitting in has been to deny their Roma identity. Whilst she attaches importance to fitting in, she states that it should not be at the cost of hiding one’s identity. She saw the impact of this while working as an activist in Hungary, and knows that deferring to stigmatisation by concealing one’s identity can itself reinforce prevailing social interactions that contribute to stigmatisation (Yoshino, 2006), illustrated in the following quote:

bad feelings about Roma turn into bad policy and practice. I pray every day for Roma to be proud of our identity, I see hiding who you are as like death. What’s more, it doesn’t work for us as Roma and it doesn’t help non-Roma too, it just continues the bad discrimination.

Discussion

Whilst previous research has articulated how stigma attributes influence the experiences of individuals with stigmatised identities (Goffman, 1963), a lacuna exists in scholarship around hierarchies of stigma research. Our research aligns with UK and EU research that shows that Roma are the most disadvantaged group educationally and economically, and stigmatisation of Roma is widespread. In this sense it seems there is a hierarchy of disadvantage and stigma, where Roma are more acutely disadvantaged.

A surprising finding of our research was the role of social capital that much literature applauds as indisputably positive. On a positive note, the depth and extent of social capital undoubtedly provided strength and support to the Roma community. Less positive, perhaps, was its role as a constraining force, holding Roma back from deploying other agency or from gaining alternative sources of legitimacy and reduce their capacity to initiate renegotiations.

In terms of implications of our research and future work, although the sample size is tiny in this study and caution should be taken when interpreting and applying the findings in different contexts, the study has provided a new direction for rethinking stigma and its impact. It argues and substantiates that stigma assigned to one at birth does not automatically impact the rest of one’s life negatively. Our study articulates how stigma strategies can initiate changes within a local group; in doing so the study opens up new ways of thinking about how change can occur within broader social structures like community centres. Discursive acts that represent identity meanings within one group can influence others and spread beyond the boundaries of the group to others in the organisation such as our local community group, a hub to many marginalised groups. One way this can happen is through overlapping networks of members: members in one group can take discursive acts to their interactions in other groups such as interactions that occur in the community allotment. Identity meanings can thus become more broadly held and act as mechanisms for enacting change from the bottom up. Future researchers can focus on the far-reaching effects of an individual’s decisions, from their effects on organisational culture to local and national policy and norms. We show that identity is established, challenged, and maintained through such intersection of experience, interaction, and social capital. Future work can replicate the current study in a larger and longer scale to develop the findings in this study.

Buoyed by further funding for our projects we plan to influence policy and are in consultation with UK government to increase equity for Roma in the job and education markets, through both policy and practice. This story does not end here; as Marcella begins her study to become the UK’s second only Roma lawyer and continue her community role we are extending the reach of our work by sharing project outputs and good practice with other Roma projects in the UK and the EU. Much of what we have learned through working with Marcella,

such as the role of social capital and community support applies to other marginalized groups too and thus similar interventions as LREN and REAP can support them. Positive behaviours such as compassion, mutual support, empathy, magnified through the COVID-19 pandemic have sharpened our awareness of community as the foundation of fulfilment (Sennett, 1998). In Marcella's words "Sharing knowledge of Roma or any different group reduces discrimination and stigma and helps build strong communities. Be seen and celebrate don't hide."

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Author Note

Helen Collins is a Senior Lecturer in HRM at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU). With Patricia Harrison her research into barriers to equality for Roma has led to two community projects, both receiving recognition by UK government for their role in advancing improved opportunity in employment and education for Roma. Please direct correspondence to h.collins@ljmu.ac.uk.

Patricia Harrison is a Senior Lecturer in HRM at LJMU. As well as research into removing barriers to labour market participation for marginalised groups such as Roma, Tricia is also researching increased access to skill development in local skills eco systems. Please direct correspondence to p.a.harrison@ljmu.ac.uk.

Marek Palasinski is a Senior Lecturer in psychology at LJMU. His research interests are wide and include published work in youth crime, justice, stigmatised identity, and discrimination. Please direct correspondence to m.palasinski@ljmu.ac.uk.

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