



# An exploration of social representations of the Roma woman in Italy and Brazil: Psychosocial anchoring to emotional reactions



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the content of the system of representations of Roma women as they emerge from a free-association task, collected from a sample of university students in Italy and Brazil. Available data on the situation of Roma women show that they experience greater social exclusion than the Roma men and the women of the majority community, especially in accessing employment, education, health and social services.

The sample consists of 643 participants (mean age 22.9), 50.4% of whom are Italians and 74.3% female. Data were collected via a free-association task, the prompt word being “Gypsy woman”. SPAD-T software ran a lexical correspondence analysis, extracting two factors. We defined the first axis: “The mysterious Roma woman vs. The Outcast Roma woman”, and the second axis: “The seer Roma woman vs. Different sides of Roma woman”.

Moreover, psychosocial anchoring to the emotional reactions towards Roma people was studied, showing how different groups of individuals, characterized by specific emotional reactions to Roma people, were attuned to certain social representations of the Roma woman.

The implications of these results are discussed in terms of the role played by Roma women in traditional Roma and western societies.

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This study deals with the system of representations of Roma<sup>1</sup> women in western society, given the relevant impact that a general belief system may have on individual perceptions and collective behaviours toward ethnic minorities (Dalsklev & Kunst, 2015; Moscovici, 1998; Jodelet, 1991; Wagner, 2003).

The Roma community is an ethnically differentiated group made up of approximately 12 million people (the official data are few). The Roma today live all across Europe and the Americas, as well as in some areas of Asia and Oceania (Ringold, Orenstein, & Wilkens, 2005). There is no single Roma land and they see themselves as “a people without territory”. Despite this diversity, Roma across the world stress how they share fundamental linguistic, cultural and historical commonalities (Ravnø, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Roma” used throughout the present text refers to Roma, Sinti, Kale, Travellers, and related groups in Europe, and aims to cover the widely diverse groups concerned, including groups that identify themselves as Gypsies (Council of Europe, The Strasbourg Declaration on Roma, 20 October 2010, <[wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1691607#P20.276](http://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1691607#P20.276)>).

Throughout Europe, Roma communities are at high risk of marginalisation. Roma people are positioned at the bottom of many social comparative indexes concerning average income, employment rate, life expectancy, education and health (Ringold et al., 2005). Roma families differ from other families in terms of certain demographic features: high fertility and mortality rates, low life expectancy, due to their living conditions and scarce access to health services (Corsi & Crepaldi, 2010).

Data on the situation of Roma women are particularly few and far between, even though most of sociological studies show that Roma women experience greater social exclusion than Roma men and the women of the majority community, especially in accessing employment, education, health and social services, partly as a result of the gender roles that persist in Roma communities (AWID, 2008; Corsi & Crepaldi, 2010; Foldes & Covaci, 2011; Ringold et al., 2005). Traditionally, the woman's role is mainly to take care of the home and family and she has responsibility for the transmission of traditional Roma culture and ethnicity between generations. Roma women start taking on adult-caring roles from the age of 11, are expected to marry young and have many children in life-long marriages. The traditional care-giver role of Roma girls and women is also an obstacle to their education and to access to the labour market (European Commission, 2010).

As for housing conditions, the Roma usually live in segregated, isolated districts with poor access to public transport and social services, or in makeshift camps on the outskirts of urban areas (as in Italy and Brazil), or caravan sites. This makes the domestic workload particularly hard for Roma women, who spend most of their lives in these housing conditions, and contributes to aggravating their health problems. As for health conditions, Roma women tend to experience greater health risks than non-Roma women, because of early and multiple pregnancies and abortions, a heavy domestic workload, poor housing and malnutrition.

### Social perception of Roma people

Social perception of Roma people could be better understood by considering the interplay between Social Representation Theory (SRT; e.g., Moscovici, 1961/2011, Moscovici, 1984; Duveen, 2000) and Social Identification Theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1981), instead of considering them as two separate paradigms. We agree with Elcheroth, Doise, and Reicher (2011) and those who have called for more integration of the two theories. The construction of SR is related to the presence of social categories, that is the way we divide people into groups, in the social world. The way one individual orients a representation depends on how he/she categorise his/herself in relation to the relevant group at stake. At the same time, the construction of a social identity relies on the SR shared by group members regarding a specific relevant topic. This is even more true in the case of Roma people: anthropologically speaking, non-Roma people need to differentiate themselves from the “noble savage” Roma, that with its nomadic free-living threatens the majority's identity. In this sense, the majority group needs to differentiate itself from the minority, in order to preserve the former's human status. The study of Roma people as a social object needs to take into consideration both the majority-minority intergroup relationships and the content of the majority's shared knowledge about this group.

Socio-psychological literature has shown that negative stereotyping by the majority population remains a key issue. In all countries, Roma experience widespread and deep-seated discrimination and racism (Csepeli & Simon, 2004; Van Baar, 2012), in many domains such as employment, housing, health care access (Janevic, Sripad, Bradley, & Dimitrievska, 2011) and education (Dimitrova, Chasiotis, Bender, & van de Vijver, 2013).

SRT has been used as a theoretical framework to investigate laypeople's perceptions of the Roma minority, which has been seen as the favourite target of the dehumanization process (e.g. Pérez, Moscovici, & Chulvi, 2007). Specifically, the Roma minority is conceived at the heart of an ontologization process, according to which it is represented as a symbol of “animal kingdom” as compared to the non-Roma “human” majority in the SRs of the majority-minority relationship. From the discourse analysis perspective, Tileagă (2006) analyses the ideologies of moral exclusion of the Roma group among Romanian citizens, showing the construction of a socio-moral order linked to notions of lesser humanity or non-humanity. Given the Roma minority's resistance to dominant social processes and the maintenance of a distinct culture and economy, in the face of myriad pressures towards integration and assimilation, the ontologization process intervenes to lessen the threat leveraged by this group (Moscovici and Pérez, 2007; Powell, 2011). Empirical research has shown that more cultural characteristics are attributed to the ingroup than to the Roma, whereas more natural characteristics are assigned to the Roma than to the ingroup in Great Britain and Romania (Marcu & Chrysoschoou, 2005), and in Italy (Berti, Pivetti, & Di Battista, 2013). In their three-experiment study, Pérez et al. (2007) found that the Roma minority was more negatively ontologized by attributing more animal-like characteristics to them when the participants were primed by a picture of a wild animal (i.e. a monkey) representing nature, as compared to when primed with a picture of a domesticated animal (i.e. a dog) representing human culture. Recent studies showed that SRs on Roma people are similar in many countries (e.g. Brazil), with Roma people being associated to a primitive, wild and dirty idea. Besides being seen as criminals, Roma people are seen as carriers of parasites, diseases and even curses (Bonomo, Faria, Brasile, & Souza, 2012; Carvalho, Lima, Faro, & Silva, 2012; Mendes, 2000; Silva & Silva, 2000).

### Social representations and emotions

When studying the minorities historically subjected to prejudice and discrimination, we need to deal with the emotional/affective dimension experienced by the ingroup toward the outgroup. For this reason, SRT, described as a cogni-

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