SUPPORTING SOCIALY EXCLUDED ROMANY (GYPSY) PARENTS IN PROVISION QUALITY PARENTING

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Abstract:
The very aim of the presented text is to formulate goals and themes for the methods of social work with socially excluded Roma families in the Czech Republic. My suggestions are based on the interviews which I conducted with 17 experts (social workers, Roma pedagogical assistants, Roma activists, teachers and clerics). I talked with them about the living conditions of socially excluded Roma families. While in my previous articles I addressed the analysis of the interviews and described how our conversation partners perceived the performance of parental functions, now I would like to address the implications of the research results for the practice of social work. The reason for the formulation of the principles and methods of social work in the Roma families is very important. Effective social work with the families could be prevention of child removal.

Key Words: Parenting, Social Exclusion, Romany, Family Centre, Social Work

Introduction:

The very aim of the following text is to *formulate goals and themes for the methods of social work with socially excluded Roma families. In this paper I enlarge on a study whose basic results I have published formerly.* In the background research study, I focussed on analysing interviews conducted with 17 experts (social workers, Roma pedagogical assistants, Roma activists, teachers and clerics) with whom we talked about the living conditions of socially excluded Roma families. The aim of the research was to provide an answer to the question: "*In what ways are parental functions in socially excluded Roma families ensured?*" While in my previous articles I addressed the analysis of the interviews and described how our conversation partners perceived the performance of parental functions, now I would like to address the implications of the research results for the practice of social work.

While being aware that our research relied "only" upon the expertise, experiences and opinions of workers who are in professional contact with families of the type in question and therefore do not necessarily describe objectively the living conditions of socially excluded Roma families, I will now ponder the significance of the suggested conclusions for the potential of children from these families to integrate into the majority society. I will also explore what this means for the formulation of goals and methodology of social work.

The paper is divided into three chapters. In the first one (The performance of parental functions as a precondition for social inclusion of children) I return to the basic results of the research and I formulate possible influences of the studied lifestyle on social inclusion of children. The second chapter (The formulation of goals of social work in the context of research findings) then closely follows from the first one and contains a formulation of goals which, on the basis of the research, can be considered adequate for social work with socially excluded Roma families. In the third chapter (How to realise the set goals: suggestions for practical social work) I consider how to meet the goals in question.

In the following text I recapitulate on the results of the referred research and ponder on the possible implications of the observed state of affairs for social inclusion of children of the families concerned.

Basic care

The primary characteristic of socially excluded Roma families is material deprivation (Navrátil, Šišláková 2004). It manifests itself in a lack of finances, inadequate housing conditions, insufficiencies in hygiene and last but not least, inappropriate nurture. As a result of these conditions, six-year-old children from these families are below the norm set for accepting a child into the first grade. Even if they are accepted, their social integration – both among his/her peers and in relation to meeting requirements imposed by the school system – is hindered. As far as their peers are concerned, effects of stigmatisation are probable, relating to the standard of clothing, personal hygiene etc. In relation to meeting school responsibilities, problems may be caused by cramped housing conditions, as well as insufficient and inadequate nourishment that might impede the psychological and physical development of the child. Limited conditions for the provision of basic care are probably among the main factors that both in the short and the long term reduce the potential of Roma children to integrate (Sirovátka 2003).

Ensuring safety

The Roma child living in a family affected by social exclusion is confronted with considerable threats from its surroundings (Navrátil, Šišláková 2004). Not uninterestingly, the parents reinforce the child's presumption (stereotype) that the surrounding (mainly majority) world is dangerous. The parents of these children often strengthen their own cultural identity by rejecting the majority culture. A feeling of security and safety is encouraged by an emphasis on (social) belonging to the family and community. In other contexts it became apparent, however, that belonging to the Roma community is regarded in an ambivalent manner – alongside the mentioned emphasis, it is, in certain situations, denied and glossed over. We believe that the feeling of security and safety that is thus imparted to children can be effective at a young age. In the long term it can be a source of tension and uncertainty. These originate in the question "Where do I really belong?" There does not seem to exist a satisfying answer to this question, particularly for the adolescent Roma. To have access to the opportunities of modern society can be seen as beneficial, but it means adopting elements of thought and behaviour that are, in fact, those of the majority (which have been, however, marked by his/her parents as dangerous). To be a good Roma (particularly in the cultural meaning of the word) could be good from the point of view of the possibility to continue the correct (family, traditional) line, but at the same time it means renouncement of the above opportunities. Both can be seen as good and evil (suitable/unsuitable). Both choices bring with them the necessity of sacrifice.

The feeling of security built on the foundation of rejecting the majority lifestyle (culture) can, of course, be an obstacle to the integration of the Roma child even at a young age. Mistrust that he/she may harbour against his/her classmates, teachers etc. may lead to a mutual, albeit groundless intolerance (Navrátil 2000).

Affection

In the families described, children are an important value. Parents have a strong emotional bond although it manifests itself differently to the relationship between parents and children in majority families (Navrátil, Šišláková 2004). It is marked by a more frequent physical contact between the mother and child, spontaneity and higher emotiveness (Šimíková, Bučková and Smékal 2003). From the point of view of the child's integration, this type of relationship to parents is a good foundation but it can have its dark sides. Matějček (1989) labels the downside of a strong emotional bond as blind love. It is not unusual in these families that as a result of this "love" towards the child, fulfilling his/her obligations (such as getting up for school) is not demanded. Such an emotional bond may become an obstacle in the child's integration and a source of his/her failures.

Stimulation

A strong emotional bond and an emphasis on the social cohesion of the family (community) afford the child a very early integration into the life of his/her primary group (the family and the Roma community). The children from these families develop their social skills that are, even before starting school and in some ways, more developed than non-Roma children of the same age (Navrátil, Šišláková 2004). The character of stimulation also supports the early development of motor functions.

The weak aspect of stimulation in such families is the small emphasis on routine and on fulfilling obligations. In consequence, the scant social control that suited the upbringing of children in traditional Roma communities is a model that tends to cause problems in the present day. Children also have a low level of stimulation in the area of intellectual development. Children from socially excluded Roma families often do not learn how to use writing implements, parents do not read them stories and do not teach them to play games. The consequences of insufficient linguistic stimulation are very serious. Children do usually learn the basics of the Czech language with the help of their parents but their knowledge remains elemental (also as a result of the parents' limited knowledge of the Czech language). The forms and character of stimuli supplied to the children by their parents in the families described can be identified as one-sided. From the point of view of children's integration into the school environment, the source of numerous barriers are lower intellectual abilities in particular, and especially an insufficient command of the Czech language as well as an inadequate ability of abstraction.

Education and guidance

The interpretation of time distinctly influences upbringing in socially excluded Roma families. Time does not play the part of an organisational element and so children are not led to carry out activities at regular intervals. The climate of upbringing is marred by disorganisation, low motivation to overcome obstacles, lack of planning and also xenophobic orientation. The children are disciplined to only a limited degree and rather haphazardly, boundaries are set for them unsystematically and impulsively, and they are very poorly encouraged to respect authority, even parental. If children are punished this tends to be physical punishment, not well thought through, setting few educational goals. As concerns social inclusion of these families, the notion of education is an evident cause of many barriers. While at school and later at the work place, capability for a systematic and punctual activity with the ability to postpone the satisfaction of one's own needs and readiness (strength) to struggle with obstacles is expected, children from socially excluded Roma families are not guided towards any of these competencies (Navrátil, Šišláková 2004). It is in this respect where I suppose these parents remain most in debt to their children.

Stability

In the previous section we touched the theme of the stability of life in socially excluded families in a practical glimpse at the style of upbringing. The material deprivation of the families, however, also affects stability, as we have already mentioned in "Basic care". In addition to these themes there is, however, another important factor that must be addressed in the context of the stability of the family, and that is a collective (family) identity. The Roma living in the families described are "attached" to their family by a tie of a strong family cohesion. It gives them particularly the benefit of mutual solidarity, feeling of belonging and the already mentioned identity. The downside of the social cohesion of the family is a more distinct social control, and a lower degree of individual freedom and autonomy. In the process of cultural and social transition, the cohesion of Roma families undergoes relativisation (along with other elements of traditional culture). As a result of the modernisation processes, Roma communities face "anomisation", losing their own identity without gaining a new one.

Paradoxically, neither the strong family cohesion nor its gradual infraction facilitate integration of Roma children from socially excluded families into the school environment. The strong family cohesion in the context of Roma culture may encourage attachment to other values than, for example, education. And the weakening of family cohesion automatically carries with it other constructive values, which could become the pillar of a new identity and lifestyle (Navrátil, Šišláková 2004).

On the basis of the interviews conducted, aware of our limited knowledge, we decided to formulate goals for social work with/in Romany families that, in the context of our findings, seem to be appropriate. I assume that other studies (of which this one is part) will contribute to a more comprehensive view of the necessary goals and possibly of adequate forms of social work. Within this text I shall take only a first, initial step.

Formulation of primary goals of social work in the context of the research findings

The survey highlighted the reality that in socially excluded Roma families, parental functions are in a number of aspects performed in a way that does not contribute to the support of the social inclusion of the children. Therefore it seems meaningful that social workers should set as one of the main goals of their assisting efforts the facilitation of performance of parental functions, or facilitation of the development of motivation and skills for the performance of these functions. In order that the realisation of this goal in the interaction between cultures could be successful it is, however, necessary to stress that all activities must be accompanied with sensitivity towards the Roma culture and a fair understanding of this culture, as well as understanding of the culture and institutions of the majority society.

Formulation of secondary goals of social work in the context of the research findings

In the life of socially excluded Roma families, xenophobia plays an extraordinarily noteworthy role. It is passed on to children as a self-evident element of life's philosophy and is meant to become part of their identity. If internalised, it is probably an important source of social detachment from the majority. In the context of deteriorating traditional social and cultural models of the Roma minority this can be seen as a power that actively works against integration and that hinders many Roma men from accepting a new (majority) lifestyle. Therefore I consider weakening the xenophobic stance as a secondary goal of social work with socially excluded Roma families.

Specific goals

Facilitating development of motivation and skills for the provision of basic care: A lack of finances and material deprivation are indisputably a limitation to the realisation of parental functions. Maximisation of family income should therefore be an obvious part of the strategy of fighting social exclusion (by means of social benefits[136] and job mediation). In addition, it is then important to afford the Roma the knowledge and skills they require to live permanently in their flats (as legal owners or tenants). It is also necessary to turn attention to the encouragement of parents' motivation towards an interest in delivering basic care to their children. It is possible to deliver care even under difficult conditions that thus need not automatically lead to the rejection of this function. It is a considerable help, for example, to develop the skill of economic management of money and other income available to the family. It is also necessary to educate Roma mothers about the importance of regular meals and a daily routine for their children. I emphasise that I consider the development of their motivation to implement this knowledge and skills as being of the highest importance (Navrátil, Šišláková 2004).

Facilitating development of motivation and skills for ensuring safety: Racism and other negative reactions to Roma are, unfortunately, a reality in the Czech society (Navrátil et al. 2003). Therefore I consider it a symptom of the defence mechanism (cultural, social and psychological) that the Roma families in question impart to their children the assumption that the majority world is unsafe. The children's feeling of security and safety should, however, be increasingly more often derived from their awareness of their own value (as the value of an individual with all of his/her idiosyncrasies, including cultural ones) rather than from a feeling of injustice. By this we are not advocating against the traditional bonds of the Roma with their family and community – on the contrary. But it is a question of weakening the pattern of fear and rejection of the majority present in the parent's upbringing style. Social workers are now presented with the task of finding activities that will support a constructive interaction between Roma and the majority society so that the vicious circle of mutual distrust is broken. This means the invention of such activities that will help replace adverse experiences, prejudices and stereotypes with a healthier picture of an alternative coexistence.

Facilitating development of motivation and skills for stabilisation of affection: It is an advantage of the families in question that parents feel a strong emotional bond towards their children. Children can benefit from regular physical contact between mother and child, spontaneity and greater emotiveness, and their maturation can be stimulated. Social workers should ensure that this strong emotional bond does not become a hindrance to the children's fulfilling school and other obligations.

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[136] With the current stress on the prevention of misuse of benefits.

The main goal for social workers in this matter will therefore be to facilitate the development of the quality of relationships between parents and children, part of which shall be setting expectations from the children and requiring the completion of tasks without this being perceived as an encroachment on their mutual emotional bonds. Special attention must be paid to helping mothers in the acknowledgement of demands of school and their systematic insistence137. In this respect, we consider it challenging to find ways whereby the husband (a traditional symbol of authority) is also drawn into cooperation in questions of education.

Facilitating development of motivation and skills for stimulation: One deficiency in the area of child stimulation appears to be a low level of social supervision that children are subjected to in the family. An important goal for social workers must, therefore, be to support parents in the setting and obeying of family life rules and in the defining of the child's respective role. We shall address this issue in the following paragraph. Children receive an inadequate degree of stimulation especially in the area of intellectual development. The goal of social work in this direction should be the development of motivation and skill of the parents in guiding the children in the use of writing implements and their assistance in other forms of stimulation for the children (reading stories, playing games etc.). Stimulation of linguistic skills is a thing apart. Parents can only play such a role as their own language level allows. Social workers should, at the very least, strive to assist to motivate the parents in taking interest in the child's linguistic competence. It is inevitable to consider an external form of support in this area (a specialist teacher, coaching, preliminary school year, a Roma teaching assistant, volunteers etc.). An important task is the support of the family in the acceptance of the need of school education as a source of life chances and success, and the motivation of parents to support their child in meeting the demands imposed by the school system.

Facilitating development of motivation and skills in systematic education, guidance and stability of the family environment: The social workers' goal in this field shall be to support parents in creating a structured living environment for their children. The reinforcement of the overall motivation of the parents towards a structured organisation of their own lives (this is related, for example, to their job performance) is essential for such an activity to be worthwhile. Also important is the setting of boundaries and distribution of competence among individual family members and the shaping of the internal family social order and value patterns. In this context, it is important to point out that social work must be sensitive in character and cannot be understood as paternalist. Such social work must stem from a deep knowledge of the Roma cultural tradition but must also reflect the current requirements set by the environment that the members of the Roma community and its particular individuals encounter and that they must master.

In the following chapter I explore how to realise the goals for social work that I have identified on the basis of the qualitative research of the life situation in Roma socially excluded families. First I comment selected organisational and methodological aspects of the establishment of the "Family Support Centre" and then I discuss a proposal for a project that I formulate as one of possible activities of the Centre, aiming at alleviating social exclusion of families and at preventing social exclusion of children living in these families. I conclude with remarks on assessing the life situation in Roma families, with respect to the specific nature of the process of life situation assessment in the case of minority clients.

Family Support Centre

A successful realisation of the proposed goals presupposes the presence of a team of social workers in the very Roma community that faces the risk of social exclusion. A convenient way of securing the presence of such teams in these communities is the establishment of Family Support Centres that shall provide low-threshold social services.

These Centres should serve as a base for qualified social workers whose job shall partly involve fieldwork (active search for clients). Each social worker should supervise a limited number of families, so as to be able to establish a good relationship with them and work with them on an intensive basis (tentatively less than 30 families).

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137 This aspect of parental responsibility is notably linked to motivation of children to education. The attitude of mothers (as persons who deliver education) is, therefore, highly important.

The main task of the social worker should be to carry out qualified assessment of the life situation in the families, design the plan of intervention, mobilise resources, supervise intervention, coordinate actors of intervention (a teacher, psychotherapist, volunteer, doctor etc.) and facilitate the synergy of their mutual action, complete intervention and evaluate its results (see Holland 2004).

It would be beneficial if the social workers were endowed, in respect to granting social benefits, with the same competencies as social workers in city districts and municipalities. Therefore it would be convenient if the Centre was founded at least in cooperation with a city district or municipality which would also set up an office in the Centre (with at least a periodic presence of a mandated official).

In addition to professional counselling, it is beneficial to carry out also other activities targeted at various groups in the Centre (couching children, leisure-time activities for children, concerts of local groups, civic counselling, debates on topical issues, self-support groups etc.). Such activities shall help incorporate the Centre in the life of the community. Not all activities must necessarily be ensured by social workers with a university degree. It is beneficial to recruit volunteers, as well as experts on various problems (a psychotherapist, specialised teacher for children with learning difficulties, speech therapist etc.) to carry out a number of activities (Havrdová, Zamykalová 2001).

It seems appropriate to finance the Centre's activities from multiple resources, with wages being paid by the given city district. The coverage of wages by local authorities is legitimate (problems of the local district are being addressed) and, compared with the coverage of labour costs from grant resources, it guarantees the desirable stability of the personnel. Fluctuation of the personnel in this type of organisation is counter-productive because it impairs stable relations between the social worker and the families he/she supervises. Other (e.g. grant) resources can be used to cover costs of specific projects which the Centre's personnel may identify as beneficial and desirable.

Comments on the methodology of life situation assessment among members of minorities
In the context of our thoughts on social work with Roma families we have so far stressed particularly the aspect of social exclusion. However, we must also take account of the fact that the status of the Roma in Czech society is that of a minority group. Therefore we must ask what challenges the so called minority reality (Navrátil, Musil 2000) presents to the methodology of social work.

Some authors believe that social work with members of minority groups can proceed from the traditional methodology (Devore, Schlesinger 1999) which, however, must be adapted in such a way as to respect the minority reality. For example, the seemingly obvious techniques such as establishing eye contact, establishing informal atmosphere, and encouraging free expression of personal worries can, in many cases, go against long-established cultural norms of a number of groups. Some authors aspire to such adaptations, seeking to reformulate traditional procedures with consideration for specific groups (e.g. Šišková 2001).

In the context of social work with the minorities, adequate assessment of the life situation becomes an especially delicate challenge. Navrátil and Musil (2000) pointed out that the assessment and interpretation of the client's life situation are decisive for the social worker's choice of methods through which to facilitate the client's social functioning. The social worker's approach to assessment is then largely governed by the paradigm which he/she explicitly or implicitly endorses[138]. For the most part, advocates of individual conflicting paradigms of social work do accept the presumption that the ultimate goal of social work is to balance the requirements of the environment and the client's ability to handle them (social functioning). However, they differ profoundly in their understanding of the determinants of this balance and the ways of establishing it. When assessing minority clients' life situation, their culture must be perceived as an important intervening variable.

Navrátil and Musil (2000) evaluated individual paradigms of social work in view of their contribution to handling problems of socially excluded minority groups. They state that each of the paradigms has its virtues and thus also its potential, nevertheless, none of them offers such an

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[138] On paradigms of social work see e.g. Payne 1997; Navrátil 2001.

interpretation of the minority client's life situation that would allow for a sufficiently complex understanding of the factors of his/her social functioning139.

For this reason, I will conclude with an attempt to formulate a broader complex of general factors and questions that must be taken into account when assessing the life situation of members of minority groups and facilitating their social functioning.

General points of departure for the assessment of the life situation of socially excluded Roma families

It follows from the theoretical groundwork for the research (Navrátil 2003) and from other studies (Navrátil, Musil 2000) that in working with the minority client who may be at risk of social exclusion social workers should ask the following questions that refer to corresponding factors of social functioning, or to aspects of the client's life situation:

- What is the minority client's perception of his/her life situation and what problems does he/she himself/herself consider burning?
- What demands imposed by the environment does the minority client find difficult to meet as a result of his/her different culture, and with what problems does it present him/her? What demands is the minority client able to handle either despite his/her different culture or, on the contrary, owing to it?
- What demands imposed by the environment does the minority client find difficult to meet as a result of his/her alienation from and distrust of the majority society and its institutions? With what problems does it present him/her? Whose requirements does the minority client accept with trust and thus strives to meet?
- With what stereotypes about his/her physical and cultural particularities is the minority client confronted and with what problems does it present him/her? What does he/she put such stereotypes down to and what role in his/her life does he/she ascribe to them? What stereotypes might the client face in contact with social workers and what influence can it have on his/her ability to handle the situation?
- Access to what opportunities and possibilities to satisfy the minority client's needs is hindered? With what problems does it present him/her? What specific needs resulting from the values of the minority culture are difficult or risky to meet for the minority client? What opportunities and possibilities to satisfy needs does the client consider accessible?
- Does the minority client face difficulties when claiming his/her wishes and requirements and with what problems does it present him/her? Where does he/she, without any problems, turn to regarding his/her claims and wishes and why?
- Does the minority client suffer from any psychic or relationship problems resulting from his/her experience of a minority status and of a "double identity" and from feelings of alienation etc.? Does this client have any psychic problems that are not directly related to him/her belonging to a minority group? How do both types of psychic problems impact his/her ability to cope with what his/her environment expects of him/her?
- Are there any positive qualities ensuing from the client's cultural traits, personal experience or minority status that could become a source of his/her better social functioning?

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[139] The paradigm marked as "*therapeutic*" is, according to the authors, characterised by an emphasis on the individual and the process of his/her inner maturation. However, it completely abstracts from the structural nexus of the problem and does not provide any guidelines for handling practical problems (e.g. ensuring social benefits). The second paradigm, marked as "*socially reformist*", regards people's problems from the perspective of disadvantaged groups; its notion of social work is highly ideological; and it deflects from the client's perception of the problem and of possible solution. The third paradigm, marked as "*counselling*" is characterised by an emphasis both on individual needs and interpretation of the situation, and on the determinants of the problem within the client's social surroundings; it respects the client's perception of the situation and of the problem. However, the counselling paradigm does not provide a perspective on and methods of intervention into the structural circumstances of social exclusion of minorities.

- Are there any very unique, yet important features of the minority client's life situation that need to be taken into account in solving his/her problems?
- What information, findings, services or experience does the minority client need in order to be able to overcome limitations and make use of potential advantages ensuing from his/her life situation? Are these particular pieces of information, findings, services and experience available? Is it possible to mediate them? If not, what needs to be done for it to be possible? Should anything be done in order for the minority client to be able to make use of these opportunities offered to him/her to improve his/her social functioning?
- Do the services that I, as a social worker, can offer to or mediate for the client match his/her own idea of adequate assistance? Or do they impinge upon any cultural or attitudinal constraints? Is it possible to adapt the services that I offer to these possible constraints?

The above list of questions is only a broad outline (each of the factors of social functioning could be broken down and specified in further detail), yet at the same time it is rather itemised. Let this complexity and openness to a more precise breakdown be understood as a warning against mechanical application of the questions above as a "list". Instead, I recommend to ponder the questions, and the concepts from which they stem, over and over, and search for both their pros and the risks associated with their implementation in practical social intervention into the life situation of the minority client.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, I find it necessary to remind the reader that this article is part of a series of qualitative studies whose ultimate aim is to identify adequate goals and instruments of social work that could facilitate the fight against social exclusion of Roma families. In this article I brought the first evaluation of the results of a partial research which was presented in the first part of this book. I discussed basic conclusions of the research and formulated possible influences on social inclusion of children. I suggested goals which, on the basis of the research, can be considered adequate for social work with socially excluded Roma families. In the concluding part of the text I outlined possible ways of realising the suggested goals.

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