

“I always felt as the Odd One Out”:

Minority status, education and reproduction. The case of the Hungarian Roma.

Earlier data from Hungary but also from other post-socialist, transitional countries point to the higher Fertility of Roma when compared to the majority population (Habicsek, 2008, Kemeny-Janky, 2004, Kalibova, 2000). The widespread assumption guiding most research on this subject is that, in the process of minority group acculturation and assimilation, fertility behaviour of minority and majority population will converge. However, new researches suggested an education-by-ethnicity (minority status) interaction: higher fertility of Roma is confined to the less educated only (Durst, 2007, Husz, 2011). This result seemingly gives support to the classic, widely tested Minority Status Hypothesis, first proposed by Goldscheider and Uhlenberg (1969) whilst explaining the fertility differentials in the case of the black Americans compare to the Whites in the US. According to this hypothesis, the insecurities and marginality of minority membership depress fertility below the levels of the majority at higher educational level. However, it is not clear from this explanation why fertility differentials occur at lower educational level.

Trying to find the explanation of the mechanism through which minority status has an influence on the reproductive strategies of the low educated women, I conducted a 6 months fieldwork in a rural Hungarian village mostly populated by Roma people. Theoretically embedded my work in the tradition of anthropological demography, I found a very complex, multi-layered explanation for the significantly higher fertility of the village poor, uneducated Roma women compared to their non-Roma counterparts. What is interesting for the purpose of this paper is that minority status has different factors at work at lower educational level than at higher educational level.

Up to date other American studies have also confirmed that minority status per se has an independent influence on reproductive behaviour –not only at the lowest but also at the highest level of educational attainment (Ritchey, 1975, Rindfuss, 1989, Kposova, 1997). It is an intriguing question whether if the minority status hypothesis has any relevance in the case of the Roma – the biggest minority group of Hungary, which is considered by some scholars as the “Blacks of Europe” on the basis of their similar, stigmatised social structural position. So far there was no research on the highly educated Roma women’s fertility, partly because of their small number.

Bridging this gap, I carried out a qualitative study, based on in- depth life history interviews among 50 Roma women with university or college degrees, and their partners/husbands if they were cohabiting. As a basis for comparison regarding the role of minority group identification in fertility behaviour, I also benefited from the experience of a comparative, qualitative demographic research which was carried out among 40, Non- Roma medium and highly educated women and their partners in Hungary (Repro Project [REPRO WP5], led by the Max Plank Institute for Demographic Research). One of mine main findings is that minority status does have an effect on the reproductive

strategies of highly educated Roma women. But their minority group status can not be seen as a purely "structural" or "cultural" variable as it is suggested. Indeed, it works through the interplay of many intermediate factors. Among others are the difficulty for the highly educated women to find a partner whom they want to form a family; the incompatibility between their perception of their gender roles and their partner's expectation regarding these roles, that is, the clash between these intellectual Roma women's desire for modern gender roles and the traditional roles their partners/spouse expect from them; and the relatively long period of self-establishment, or self-fulfilment of the studied women in a society where being Roma is a strongly stigmatised identity. All these factors point to the same direction: delaying the first birth and in many cases not managing to realize the desired number of children.