“BEING ROM” AND “BEING GREEK”: IDENTITY MATTERS IN THE EDUCATION OF GREEK ROMA

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Background

In Greece, the Roma are frequently reviled. Most Roma follow different cultural traditions compared to those of the ‘mainstream’ Greek community (e.g. community language) and are often seen as inferior. Greek Roma’s identity is complex as it is constructed out of elements of their Greek citizenship and their Rom heritage -which is less valued by the dominant Greek non-Rom society. If the Roma are to be successful in Greece, it often means laying aside their cultural heritage and picking up aspects of the dominant culture.

Focus of enquiry

This paper aims at exploring the complex ways in which identity is constructed by some Greek Roma who have progressed to Higher Education. ‘Being Rom’, ‘being Greek’ and the relationship between these two emerge as crucial in the way my participants identify themselves particularly in relation to their successful educational pathways.

Research methods

This paper draws on qualitative data generated through in-depth narrative interviews conducted with 17 Roma people in Greece who have accessed Higher Education.

Analytical/theoretical frame

This paper offers an understanding of the complexity of identity issues based on the accounts of a small number of Greek Roma who, despite the odds, have succeeded in education. ‘Romness’, ‘Greekness’ and the relationship between these two identities are used in my participants’ attempt to identify themselves. Furthermore, discourses on ethnicity, socio-economic background, gender and age inform these identities.

Research findings/Contribution to knowledge

This paper’s initial findings are as follows: first, some educationally successful Roma talk about the two different worlds -the Greek world and the Rom world- in which they live. However, in most cases, my participants see ‘Romness’ and ‘Greekness’ as intertwined aspects of themselves. Second, the way my participants identify themselves is informed by other elements such as socio-economic background and gender. Locality issues (differences between the areas where my participants live) also emerge as significant for every discussion. Third, ‘Romness’ and ‘Greekness’ are not always valorised as the core aspects of the self, as other features (e.g. profession and religion) predominate.

Taking identity issues seriously and looking at those Roma who stayed in education and succeeded seems a useful starting point in any attempt to, first, understand ‘educational success’ achieved by the Roma and, second, inform policies to realise social justice for the Roma in practice and enhance educational success for this group.