



**Social  
Communication  
Doctoral School**

## **THESIS COLLECTION**

**Györgyi Margit Elekes**

**Social determinants of the successful and unsuccessful schooling careers of  
students belonging to the Roma community in Hungary, according to a  
qualitative research project**

to the Ph.D. thesis of

**Consultant:**  
**Miklós Hadas, Ph.D., DSc.**  
university professor

Budapest, 2015

**Institute of Behavioural Sciences and  
Communication Theory**

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## **I. Preliminaries to the research and a brief justification of the choice of the theme**

The thesis explores possibilities of the social integration of the Hungarian Roma population, through an attempt at demonstrating the potential reasons for successful integration by way of analytical criteria offered by an interdisciplinary approach and at the same time assessing factors contributing to frequently encountered failures in the integration of this social group. The relevant impacts and effects are rather complex. Most scholars agree that the low schooling attainment that is typical of this social group is one of the key obstacles to the social integration of the Hungarian Roma population. Accordingly, this thesis comprises a detailed analysis of mobility offered by the school and takes account of the factors that often prevent school mobility for Roma students and consequently their successful social integration. In scrutinising success at school the study makes an attempt at investigating the wider socio-cultural environment of the Roma population which is a key factor conditioning the possibilities of social integration in a variety of aspects.

Results of most research projects relating to the Hungarian Roma population have found that the difficulties of integration are conditioned by socio-historical factors. The profound differences between the majority society and the Roma population have not disappeared over centuries of coexistence regardless of political and socio-historical systems and eras and despite an increase in schooling attainment among the Roma population during the recent period. Since the Hungarian Roma population was among the social groups that suffered the most severe losses as a consequence of the system change, the difference between the schooling attainment of Roma children and other children increased further. Today this is reflected primarily in terms of secondary school studies. A very small percentage of the young Roma used to make it and currently make it to secondary school and even among those who manage to start studies in secondary school drop out at some point. Consequently, an even smaller proportion, hardly more than one percent of young Roma people study in tertiary education institutions. Since the prerequisites for success among the Hungarian Roma population have altered since the system change, researchers consider the raising of the levels of schooling attainment as the most important condition for success. As a result, studies of the factors that contribute to certain Roma groups capability of leveraging this non-majority opportunity for school mobility have become crucially important.

The aim of the doctoral thesis is to show – in view of the above results, pinpointing the dynamic relationship between structure and individual – how the social structure, as the mechanism underlying the functioning of society, affects the individual's life, how much leeway it has on the one hand for upwards mobile individual and atypical life careers and choices and on the other hand for immobile or downwards mobile life paths.

## **II. Research methods**

My research was dominated by an interdisciplinary approach, comprising results of anthropology, sociology and social psychology, while communication science provides the framework integrating the different perspectives. The sociological perspective focuses on the determinations of the social and economic environment, on social integration and the passing down of cultural and social capital. In its approach anthropology focuses on symbolic actions, socialisation, the individuality of local communities and on variations of local patterns. In terms of social psychology it scrutinises inherited contents and ethnic conflicts. The communication science component relies on communication media (language and writing), the specifics of oral communication and on the recognitions of symbolic interactionism.

In the society of the recent decades mobility opportunities entailed by the individualisation process are posing new challenges to social sciences because it is becoming increasingly difficult to describe the social structure in terms of the earlier categories. Consequently, relevant new theoretical approaches need to be integrated in the analysis accepting the fact that the increasingly complex society cannot only be described on the basis of hierachic models but also through a network-like analysis of social positions. The use of qualitative methods seems to be suitable for grasping this complicated and increasingly complex system of relationships whereby multiple segments of various social groups and milieus seem become possible to describe.

To produce an elaborate description of processes and to identify finer details of the dynamic relationship between individual and structure the study relies on qualitative techniques including narrative interviews, structured interviews and field research. Qualitative methods help the scientist reconstruct what is referred to as life-world, provide information on the position and conditions of the Roma community in a given region and their opportunities in regard to school mobility.

### **III. Thesis results**

#### **III.1. Research hypotheses**

H1. According to my hypothesis there is a connection between success and failure in school mobility and cultural capital, social capital and school mobility. This hypothesis is confirmed by this study, exploring the contributions of the various types of capital to these relationships.

H2. My hypothesis is that the structure of weak ties – including week ties with the adult society and the peer group – affect Roma children’s’ aspiration levels, their performance at school and subsequent mobility, as is confirmed and described in detail in this study. My hypothesis that social capital has no direct impact on grades obtained at school but in an indirect way, through week ties coming into being at school – between the child and both the adult and the peer group – it does influence the student in regard to his or her acceptance of the social norms represented by the school, in changes in the attitude to studying and learning as well as to knowledge itself, i.e. in improvements in the aspiration level, has been proven.

H3. My hypothesis is that norms dominating the network of relationships in the peer group do affect school performance and the aspiration level, as is confirmed by the research.

H4. My hypothesis is that strong ties, the system of closed networks, have negative impacts on the levels of aspiration and the school mobility of those belonging to minorities. This was confirmed in the cases where norms appearing within the strong ties constitute particular values and are contrary to society’s universalistic values.

H5. My hypothesis is that “secondary socialisation” affects the performance and aspiration levels of Roma children. This research hypothesis is based on the role of “secondary socialisation” worked out by Berger – Luckmann, as has already been proven by results of my earlier research projects, which I re-tested in my continued research. “Secondary socialisation” occurs, in an institutionalised way, primarily in the education system. While one automatically realises the “reality-weight” of knowledge internalised through primary socialisation, in secondary socialisation this needs to be specifically confirmed by means of pedagogy. The child accepts the teacher’s role because it represents the confirmation of an institutional structure but if the teacher fails to develop an atmosphere of trust and confidence by means of pedagogy, as a result of the or she can progress to the status of being the significant other, the child will easily set aside the artificial knowledge conveyed by the teacher right upon leaving school. At that point other “partial realities” linked to secondary socialisation gain importance and these are linked to the peer group, more than anything else.

H6. According to my preliminary hypothesis the relationship between an upward mobilised individual and the community changes: tensions build up as a consequence of young Roma people who have managed to obtain a degree are bound to leave their traditional communities. This does not mean that they deny their Roma origins but may entail the development of an intermediary role. In other words, they fill a structural gap or space and connect the majority society's individual-oriented networks with the networks of the Roma communities.

H7. My hypothesis is that the communication media - language and writing – affect the social organisation of the Roma community involved in the study, determining, in turn, the relation to school education. My assumption that the use of communication media determines success or failure in school mobility, is proven.

H8. Slight differences were identified by earlier quantitative studies between the two counties – Borsod and Baranya – in which the research took place. According to my preliminary hypothesis the differences reflected by school mobility data pertaining to Roma children are affected by macro-social factors such as the region's social history, its economic and political position and conditions as well as the labour market environment, as is proven by this paper. It has been proven by various research projects that the less favourable data recorded in Borsod county are affected by the different micro-social environment as well. The presence of strong physical boundaries, increasingly ghetto-like school and residential community have a profound impact on Roma children's school mobility, moral ties and internalisation of universalisation values.

### **III.2. Thesis summary**

The qualitative research underlying the study explored Roma young people's the chances of success and failure in terms of school mobility. In the course of our analyses we identified and discussed inequalities stemming from different social positions, which inequalities alone determine the individual's position within the field (to use a Bourdieuan concept). The most important characteristics of relevance to this study of the Roma communities visited in Borsod and Baranya counties is their marginalised position and lack of the various types of capital (prerequisites for social success). The shortage of economic, cultural and social capital leads to the social group's marginalisation and the resulting intensification in the consequential trends of disintegration.

The experience built up in the course of the field research confirmed that the lack of various types of capital contributes to the development of social inequalities. The qualitative

procedures however, enable the identification of further inter-relationships. We interpreted our field experiences relying on the Parsonian functionalist school of society description and on available literature on anthropology, sociology and communication science. Thereby we not only pointed out inequalities stemming from the different social position but also explored reasons for and causes of disintegration or, in other words, failures in social mobility.

**1.** Social disintegration was interpreted, pursuant to the Parsonian concepts, in the context of the integration of group awarenesses and the moral bonds of individuals. Exclusion was interpreted as the individual's or the community's failure to internalise universal values in contrast to modernity's trend of universalisation. It is in such cases that we can talk about a disintegration process, which is a process that inevitably leads to the exclusion of the individual or the group from the shared social values and from the single uniform world. Social integration takes place typically through the interiorisation of universal values, it is this that makes it possible to talk about the individual's or the group's social success. On the other hand, the relationship between integration and success also describes its opposite, that is, disintegration and the relationship systems of failure. Where universal values are not interiorised, there is little chance for integration which, in turn, entails a higher likelihood for social failure.

**2.** The studies conducted in the above two counties also explored the relation to values preferred by the society, on the basis of the Parsonian and anthropological analyses, revealing that despite trends of globalisation a world of values recalling a conventional pre-modern community has been and is still continuing to exist in a variety of aspect among the region's Roma communities. Traditionalism in the Weberian sense of the term was also reflected by the ambivalent relation to universal values, including the relation to the prominent agent of secondary socialisation, that is the school. In the system of values of the Roma communities covered by the field studies habits preferred by the school (and the underlying value patterns) were interiorised only with great difficulties or against heavy obstacles. The reasons for this included, most importantly, the discrepancies between the Roma community's particular values and the universal values reflected by socialisation at school. In part however, it was a response stemming from the experiences relating to already experienced exclusion, that lead to the development of a culture of resistance, to whatever the majority society is perceived to be representing.

**3.** Our studies also revealed that the traditionalism experienced among Roma communities upheld values definitely helping to maintain community norms. This in turn built up a strong group awareness and resulted in the group members' identification with the community. Our field studies showed that this then formed a group cohesion stronger than those experienced in

other social groups. In this regard the community values enabled successful integration of the individual within the group. On the other hand, our field experiences also showed that this group cohesion and identification found it difficult to connect to the universal values preferred by the majority society. This was partly a result of the fact that the value patterns conveyed in primary socialisation are very definitely linked to the particular group of the Roma community. This is very likely related to the fact that the value patterns of the school, which is the key agent of secondary socialisation, do not typically appear for the members of the Roma community before schooling age, as pre-school presence is typically restricted to the last year spent in pre-school education and even there they are not fully represented.

**4.** The conflict between particular and universal value patterns appeared as early as in the first school years and very often resulted in early frustration and only superficial links to the values conveyed by the school. Interviews recorded in Borsod and Baranya counties show that this early integration difficulty often develops into conflicts between individual and school, that are difficult to manage. This is also partly a result of the fact that generations of parents should be assisting Roma children and young people through the difficulties of integration, the majority of whom also interiorised school-related frustrations. This fact then easily contributed to reducing the effectiveness of the integration of universal value patterns conveyed by the school, in the personality structures of the individuals concerned. One very frequent consequence of all of these is that the individual and/or his or her group favoured action strategies contrary to successful integration and mobility.

**5.** Our field study experiences also showed the limitations to the extent to which Roma youth could acquire the set of symbols of society in the course of the primary socialisation process. “Social partition walls” jointly built up by the majority society and the Roma community made it difficult to have such shared symbols appear in the Roma community and even any such appearance was reduced to something superficial. The partition walls between the two groups are social-historically conditioned. The traditionalism of the Roma communities observed in the two counties covered by the field study makes it difficult to acquire substantially different value patterns, which, in turn, profoundly affects the Roma communities’ relation to the majority and results in the functioning of discrimination structures that lead to a negative attitude, the construction of partition walls and ultimately a strengthening of internal group cohesion.

**6.** The frequently unsuccessful relations of the Roma community getting itself organised on the basis of its particular system of values, to the majority society carrying universal values, entails undesired implications in other aspects as well. The majority society experiences the

difficulties of integration very often draws the tendentious and rather direct conclusion that the Roma community is not suitable for integration. This then leads to the springing up of separation walls that make it even more difficult for the Roma community to successfully integrate with the society through acquiring universal values. This in turn, has an inevitable impact on the interiorisation process, which, again in turn, undermines the possibility of social integration as a whole. In relation to the above considerations concerning social partition walls I also pointed out that the mutual distrust between the ethnic group and the majority society and the collective experience of the ethnic group in relation to discrimination have a fundamental impact on the community's integration possibilities. Moreover, the response of the ethnic group to discrimination further reduces the chances of integration. All the more so, because as a consequence of the rejection on the part of the majority society members of the minority group often will not adapt for example to values conveyed by the school, instead, they turn against them in a way of demonstration of their opposition to the majority society.

**7.** One prerequisite for the successful social integration of the Roma population is – as was found by our field studies as well – that in addition to group membership which is often organised on the basis of ethnic considerations, an increasing number of heterophile relationships be found among the social interactions of members of the Roma community. This is required for them to have opportunities for acquiring universal value patterns besides the particular values of their ethnic community membership conditioned by social history processes. On the other hand, such heterophile system of relationships can also be capable of slowly eroding the partition walls mutually raised between themselves by the ethnic minority and the majority society. Another advantage of this procedure is that it would not necessarily question the group awareness of the ethnic community (whereby it does not endanger its identity) but offers opportunities for new group awarenesses that may make Roma individuals' social contacts successful even outside the primary group. This then may, ultimately, bring about an increased chance of social integration.

**8.** Our field studies in the two counties showed that the social integration of the Roma communities faced increased difficulties where the individuals' group awareness was primarily linked to ethnic communities organised on the basis of their particular values. Particularly the phenomenon observed in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county lead to the creation of such a group awareness that conveyed norms to the members of the ethnic community that differed from that of the majority community in a variety of aspects and the end result was a limited scope of association with the world of values of the majority society. This then draws attention to the importance of the system of social networks. An individual lives embedded in networks of

connections, thus the pattern and quality of family, relatives, neighbours and friends affects the position and behaviour of the individual, along with, as a consequence, his or her relation to knowledge, school performance and sometimes even his or her social mobility.

**9.** The communication science considerations of the study draw attention at the same time to the fact that the nature of the set of roles may be explained by not only the relation to universal and particular value patterns but also by the community's typical communication medium. As we have demonstrated, in the course of the field research of the two counties concerned, we found Roma communities characterised by traditionalism in a variety of aspects. Oral communication was the dominant communication medium in those social groups. One result of this fact is that the verbal communication in the Roma communities is related typically to the present. Verbal communication, however, do not convey new information contents, rather, the interactions are aimed at transparency and simplicity.

The communication medium of verbalism also explains that in social interactions there are few or no abstract concepts referring to situations that are independent of the concrete communication situation. A way of thinking that depends on the given situation of interaction, that is not an abstract way of thinking, is not capable of much abstraction and is strongly determined by personally experienced circumstances. The above characteristics of the Roma studied in the field follow from the dominant use of verbalism as a means of communication. The findings of the field study and the analyses of the written study drew attention to the fact that the frequent school failure of Roma students is also related to the different proportions of written and oral communication in comparison to other social groups. In Roma communities where social interaction is structured nearly exclusively by oral communication, students find it more difficult and have less success in facing the challenges entailed by written communication. The main reason for this is that the day-to-day practice of written communication cannot condition Roma young people to have a different view of written communication. for writing results in an increase in complexity in the process of communication which entails the use of the more abstract symbols and a more fundamental differentiation of mental dimensions as well as an increased role of secondary observation that can be acquired at great difficulties in communities relying primarily on oral communication. This then has a major impact on the chances of success at school which is the key mobility channel for a community that is sort of capital.

**10.** The dissertation showed that the implications of a closed group awareness, social communication dominated by oral communication and a low level of complexity of role patterns also appeared in the relation to the primary agent of secondary socialisation, that is the

school, while the role of the school as a means of socialisation have been growing increasingly important along with the continuous increase in the number of roles to be filled in an increasingly differentiated society. Owing to the increasing social pressure for the acquiring of sets of roles the role of formal education has also become increasingly important. In other words, the school is increasingly structuring society and it has become an indispensable channel for mobility.

The relatively simple set of roles of the ethnic community and its oral communication medium however, has been having difficulties in coping with school challenges, where the expected sets of roles and the more complex roles formed at schools and the cognitive structures based on written communication often failed to find connections to the structures of roles brought along by students coming from ethnic communities and their cognitive structures based on oral communication. The possibilities for integration were also reduced by the fact that the Roma community had a small number of heterophile connections. This was partly a sign of the closed nature of the group awareness of the Roma community and partly it contributed to the strong rejection of the majority society of individuals coming from the ethnic community. Accordingly, members of the Roma community had little chance for internalising the differentiated set of roles of modernity and for the related successful social integration.

The above however, are related not only to the social phenomena described above. Works on sociology in Hungary also draw attention to the fact that the frequent cases of failure of integration are also related to selection, an increasingly dominant process among primary schools in Hungary. As was also indicated in field research in the above two counties, one reason of this phenomenon is that a significant proportion of Roma students are concentrated in a specific group of school. A selective schooling system is a structural characteristic that does not create the possibility for poor and Roma students to acquire valid knowledge, thereby it obstructs their chances in the labour market later on.

**11.** Our field research also showed the process whereby the integration of the Roma community was significantly more successful. Field research conducted in Baranya county show that the local Roma community has been significantly more successful in quitting membership of groups showing traditional behaviour patterns. In response to economic challenges they have interiorised survival strategies that supplemented or replaced with the universal interests of the majority society, for the most part, particular interests of the primary group, not only making their economic activities more successful but also interiorising group-specific values underlying their social integration.

On the one hand, shifting from their traditional Roma communities, multiplied their heterophile connections as well. This was a prerequisite for the acquiring and successful application of the economic procedures and techniques adopted by the majority society and it also constituted a basis for continued integration processes. It is considered to be linked to the heterophilia that is encountered more often in Baranya county that the Roma community managed to interiorise the complex sets of roles that can be acquired in the conventional communities only at difficulties more successful through new, exogamic types of contracts. On the other hand, the increasing complexity of the sets of roles was also reflected in success at school as well. Roma students with more heterophile ties and with universal value patterns that were made more strongly internalised as a consequence, achieved higher performance at school as well. These factors, in turn, provided better opportunities for social integration.

**12.** Success was also explored on the basis of individual life paths with the aid of the narrative interview technique. Of the six life careers investigated in the study a total of six upward mobility paths were observed, three of which were intra-generation and three were of inter-generation paths. Of the mobility channels of the interviewees we found marriage and partner relationships as well in the way of mobility vehicles but the most important one was school, which is, according to Sorokin, the most significant mobility factor. School, as a mobility channel is particularly important for Roma interviewees since the majority of the families concerned have hardly any economic or social capital. Therefore, encounter with the school without frustrations, successful school career is particularly important for Roma youth. The narratives show that the majority of them faced no negative discrimination at school, indeed, teachers even helped them catch up and assisted their continued school career.

**13.** A “fate event” was encountered in each intra-generation mobility narratives, as a consequence of which the interviewees re-valued their previous life paths, their presents and futures. This external and internal event (illness, accident, death, etc.) had such a compelling impact on the lives of the interviewees that forced them to give up their preceding modes of life and to adopt new life strategies. Each of the three individuals chose learning – the accumulation of cultural capital. They really had no other choice, because neither they themselves nor their families had sufficient economic or social capital for reorienting their life paths. This is also an indication of the fundamental importance of school as a mobility channel for Roma young people towards their social integration and success in life. In order to enable this to be seen as a potential choice however, suitable wider economic and social conditions and circumstances are required. In addition to personal motivation therefore there is a need for a statutory framework that provide Roma young people to start or resume their studies. Such possibilities

were created after the system change but civil society initiatives that have enabled systems supporting Roma young people – scholarships, university preparatory courses, foundation secondary schools, colleges, further training programs – have also been crucial.

**14.** A flexible, adaptable and adaptive personality is depicted by successful Roma narratives, a personality that is capable of adopting the majority norm and culture. Like in the case of our field studies, we found again that young people's capability of internalising universal value patterns had been key to success in mobility. Success was usually based on the fact that primary family socialisation and secondary school socialisation were compatible in the case of these Roma young people. This created the cooperating personality that could win trust and confidence among those in their environments and made it possible to build up social capital. Thereafter, by converting this into some little economic capital, made it possible for them to accumulate incorporated cultural capital. The institutionalised from of incorporated cultural capital, that is the final examination certificate as proof of cultural competence, can be converted eventually into economic capital. And all these make it possible for successfully mobilised Roma intellectuals to find better positions in the economic field.

**15.** Two of the interviewees had been raised in state care before they went on to become successful Roma individuals. The narratives show that they are facing the largest number of spiritual difficulties, internal tensions and consequential illnesses. Of the Roma intellectuals they are the most exposed ones and they should require the most material and spiritual support. These two life careers are indicative of further issues to be discussed in the context of continued research. On the one hand, it is definitely confirmed that the outcome of primary socialisation largely depends on the transfer of values and role models taking place in an adaptive and emotionally rich environment. The more difficult careers of those growing up in state care and their spiritual injuries sustained along the way are explained primarily by the rigid and formalised medium of primary socialisation. This highlights not only reforms that need to be made to state institutions but also to the fact that the universal value patterns demonstrated there are not sufficient for successful social integration and upwards mobility. The break-out of from their original environment of the successful young Roma individuals in our study always necessitated the presence of an emotional identification which they had to go without – however painfully – in state institutions. In the light of the case studies (and as themes for further studies) the question is whether it is the Roma communities with their particular value patterns and emotionally full socialisation medium or rather, the state institutions with their universal value patterns but rigid socialisation medium will be more successful (or less unsuccessful) in integrating this social group facing serious disintegration difficulties.

**16.** Narratives of adult interviewees grown up in segregated places in deprived family environments also indicated the immense conflicts successful individuals had to cope with within their communities. Roma intellectuals who had mobilised successfully, ones who had grown up in small Roma communities, could not, even if they wished to, return to their communities because they have “*grown out of*” and are no longer compatible with them. In other words, universal value patterns and more complex role sets often find it impossible to connect to the communities with their particular value patterns and undifferentiated role sets. This then causes internal conflicts for them: they no longer belong to the traditional Roma community that is emotionally still important for them but they have not got integrated fully in the non-Roma world either. They find themselves in a special no man’s land between two worlds, which often makes them uncertain and even turn around a promising successful process of social integration.

These upwards mobility processes are by no means accidental, the life careers covered by the study clearly show that most of them could never have materialised without laws, institutional regulations and scholarship systems providing assistance for those concerned. Roma mobility paths provide a sort of an indication of the openness of society though they provide no information on the degree of this openness. Nonetheless, the life careers we have processed may set an example for the Roma community, demonstrating that by accumulating and then institutionalising incorporated cultural capital they may end up in better positions in the economic field.

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