

## SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTION OF THE SOCIAL SUPPORT BY THE SOCIALLY EXCLUDED ROMA PEOPLE

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### Abstract

Taking into consideration that a Roma family is still extensive and cohesive in comparison with a majority family according to David (2004), there is an assumption that it offers a fairly strong social support. In regard to the social support of the socially excluded Roma people, first of all, it concerns fulfilment in its economic factor.

The objective of our article is to define what the selected Roma respondents read, from the subjective point of view, as factors of the social support, what is the proportion of its anticipated and instrumental forms and, last but not least, if there is any balance between the social support being provided and received.

The chosen methodologies were the qualitative socio-ethnographic field research, semi-structured interview technique and participant observations. The research was implemented in two extensive Roma families ( $N=21$ ) in two socially excluded locations in the South Bohemian Region. The interviews reflected the concept described by Křivohlavý (2001) who divides the social support into the micro, mezzo and macro levels; the elicited data is subsequently described in the article according to this concept.

The micro level proved to be the most significant factor of the social support for the described group, not only in the emotional respect. It also represented the most significant source of funds. However, under some circumstances, it seemed negative too. The mezzo level was perceived, first of all, in the anticipated form; therefore, friends or the community rather represented a potential than the real source of the social support. The macro level was not reflected as a source of the support by the respondents.

The outcome of our article is the finding that the social support may mean, to the socially excluded Roma people, one of the factors necessary for the literal "survival" of an individual in the conditions of a socially excluded location.

**Key words:** Roma communities – a socially excluded location – social support – subjective perception

### INTRODUCTION

The social support represents one of the significant social determinants in the state of health (Wilkinson and Marmot 2005). First of all, its projective impact is perceived in this sense. In our research,

we were interested in mechanisms of the effect of the social support in the Roma communities living in the social exclusion. With regard to the fact that the Roma communities consider and considered the high degree of the social support to be typical in the sense of construction of the

hierarchy and social roles as well as economic strategies, it gives rise to a question, to which extent this situation also applies to the socially excluded Roma families, whose traditional structure has been actually affected by the exclusion (Steiner 2004).

Our contribution provides a viewpoint of the families living in selected socially excluded locations; in other words, a subjective perception of the issues described. We were interested in the subjective perception of the social support in social life of the Roma people excluded in the sense of recipients and providers of this support; its main sources – the proportion of the internal sources (available in its own family or community) and external sources (available outside the community, such as non-government non-profit organisations and state social policy); whether the social support may also acquire negative values for the target group described; and the areas where the target group represents a provider/recipient of the social support.

### **Social dimension of the social exclusion and how it reflects in the social support**

As it was already mentioned in the introduction, the social exclusion is, combined with the description of the social support, significant in that sense that its social dimension<sup>1</sup> is connected with a breakup of the traditional kind of the Roma household, mainly, because extensive families are separated spatially (Růžička 2006). Individual members are still dependant on their families in many aspects; however, the social and emotional dependence is substituted by the economic dependence intensified by the economic deprivation that the exclusion brings along.

Therefore, if we wished to focus on the issue of the social support, it would be possible to

apply several concepts. In our article, we have applied the concept and division of the social support according to Křivohlavý (2001) who specifies three levels of the social support: the micro, mezzo and macro levels.

At the micro levels, the closest persons, a partner and/or nuclear family represent the source of the social support. However, in our concept, it was impossible to consider a family only as a nuclear family because, according to David (2004), such a family does not feature in the Roma communities. Therefore, primarily, we concentrated on several extensive families living in one household and on relatives living in the immediate proximity of the respondents (in one house or one street).

The mezzo level is saturated by the extensive social surroundings. Křivohlavý (2001) defines it as the social support provided by work colleagues, interest clubs, religious associations etc. However, with regard to the fact that inhabitants of the socially excluded locations are mostly unemployed (World Bank 2008) and/or they are in touch only with a limited circle of people delimitated most often by the space within the socially excluded location (Růžička 2006), it is impossible to take into consideration a wider group of people defined by Křivohlavý (2001) in the concept of the mezzo level. Therefore, at this level, our research concentrates on three groups identified by the respondents as sources of the social support. It concerns neighbours, friends and the community.

Lastly, the macro level represents the all-society form of the assistance. Besides the family, closest social surroundings and community, in our respondents, we assumed the state – its social policy in the form of the social system due to the fact that a large portion of them was unemployed and depending on the income from social benefits – as the most important source of the instrumental social support.

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<sup>1</sup> Littlewood and Herkommer (2000) understand the social exclusion in the strict sense as the fact that the social contacts of the excluded people are reduced to the contact with those who are situated in the same social and economic position. Also the number of those contacts is usually less than the number of the contacts of an average individual from the majority society (Steiner 2004). It represents a relatively significant obstruction for any potential attempt to leave the excluded location in many aspects where existence of the “new” generation that has grown up in the socially excluded locations without even experiencing the employment of their parents, is stated in the first place.

Further, our research focused on two factors of the support – the anticipated (expected) and instrumental (received) social support (Kebza 2005). The anticipated social support in the Roma families represents some kind of a standard. Generally, it has always been expected and it is expected that “the family will help” if needed (Plavjaníková et al. 2008). An example of the instrumental support is financial loans within the family, which, in fact, secures the continuity of the economic activity in a socially excluded location.

## METHODS AND MATERIAL

The subject matters of our research interest were two extensive Roma families living in two different types of the socially excluded locations<sup>2</sup> in the South Bohemian Region<sup>3</sup>. It concerned a hostel for non-payers situated in the Okružní Street in České Budějovice and a block of flats in České Velenice. The respondents were recruited from three multi-generation Roma families (two related families from České Velenice – identified as A and B, and one family from České Budějovice – identified as C) and comprised of 21 persons in total (birth years from 1965 to 2001).<sup>4</sup> The research represented one of the parts of the dissertation work<sup>5</sup> where the data was collected through semi-structured interviews and the participant observation technique.

We considered it unsuitable to identify sources of the social support as well as its extent through a simple question, such as e.g. “Do you think that the family would help you if needed?” because a certain extent of the (at least anticipated) social support in the Roma communities is a standard and its

denial could border with an insult. Therefore, the social support was surveyed through the semi-structured interview on the given topic and subsequently complemented through the technique of long-term participant observations when the information regarding visits to relatives, financial loans, their repayments etc. were noted primarily.

The following areas represented the basic structure of the interviews conducted – the micro, mezzo and macro levels of sources of both the anticipated as well as instrumental social support and potential negative aspects of the social support.

## RESULTS

### ***The family as the micro level of the social support***

The respondents perceived the family as an extensive group of relatives where the main source of the support meant logically those living most closely regardless a kind of kinship: “... *I found out that it was a hectic agony to find work... So I found myself a girlfriend and started living with her. Then, we got married. The family welcomed me, took me under their wing, so I was there, in the family of my wife's parents*” (a male respondent, 40 years, České Budějovice).

In households, it was absolutely natural and also almost existentially necessary to gather funds of individual members in the “joint purse”: “*From the wages, we contribute 5,000.– to Mom for food. We contributed her from benefits too and then, we were left with nothing. We can buy at least something for ourselves now*” (sisters, 19 and 21 years, České Velenice). It was the way to find out running of the household because incomes of individual

<sup>2</sup> They are both described in *Analysis of Socially Excluded Roma Locations and Absorption Capacity of Subjects Functioning in This Area* (2006).

<sup>3</sup> However, it is necessary to note that the majority of Roma living currently in the South Bohemian Region has their roots in settlements in Eastern Slovakia (Radičová 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, there were two Roma families representing representatives of the Roma elite researched for the purpose of the dissertation; however, it is unnecessary to work with them for the purpose hereof (a comment by authors).

<sup>5</sup> Social Determinants in Health of the Selected Roma Communities (Kajanová 2009, instructed by PhDr. Eva Davidová, CSc.) where the objective was to qualitatively describe an impact of ten social determinants in health according to Wilkinson and Marmot (2005) on the state of health in the selected Roma communities.

members (social benefits, seasonal or random income) often covered the entire month – due to various stages of the income. In this case, the social support in the form of funds was provided by children to their parents.

Another factor of the micro level was provision of accommodation and background to the young generation by their parents and it was considered as a certain standard that was counted with; therefore, it concerns the anticipated support. During the entire period of our research, we have encountered no accusations evoked by living together. The older generation talked about the young one in the sense that “we are glad they are here” and never “we tolerate them because they have nowhere to go”.

The support was also functional in case of separate households when parents solely provided their children with the support in comparison with the previous example. Thus, it is apparent that this imaginary cycle has a certain system in the sense that “I have the funds now, I will help you” and vice versa “*I didn't get the benefits, I had one month missing... Dad promised to give me 1,000.– now, Dad never wants anything back and doesn't give me any grief about money*” (a male respondent, 24 years, České Velenice).

The extensive family represented the instrumental source of the support at the moment when members in the household were unable to assist financially any longer. Only then, the assistance was sought in the extensive family: “*In eighty nine' (the house number in the location České Velenice) they are used to lend to each other. Whoever draws later, borrows from the one who draws earlier; I have lent before, for cigarettes, for snacks. The truth is that they always give it back. Sometimes bit by bit and sometimes all at the same time. You borrow usually up to CZK 500*” (a female respondent, 23 years, České Velenice).

Besides the instrumental sources, the social support received in the family included various forms of help with various activities, such as babysitting or care for the sick. All the interviewed families stated that they would place none of their relatives in the senior home. The respondents maintained a similarly disapproving opinion in regard to placing children in children's homes; however, each

of them had someone in their extensive family who is or has been in a children's home.

The material support had various dimensions, not only the financial one. Objects were common to lend, for instance, the entire house was using the washing machine of the “A” family at one stage and the majority of families was driving the car of one relative if needed.

### ***Neighbours, friends and the community as the mezzo level of the social support***

Neighbourly relations, disregarding relatives in the role of neighbours, varied in our research group. The “A” and “B” families (České Velenice) had the Roma neighbours and maintained good relations with them, kept in contact with them, lent each other small amounts of cash, cigarettes and food (therefore, the instrumental support), were on the friendly terms and their children played together. However, those interactions always took place outside the privacy of their flats (it means that they happened in hallways, in front of their houses etc.). To the contrary, the “C” family (České Budějovice), besides their relatives, maintained friendly relations with no neighbours: “*The neighbours are dreadful; they constantly come asking for something to borrow; they constantly beg coffee, sugar, cigarettes; they go into my cupboards*” (a female respondent, 35 years, České Budějovice). Relations between inhabitants in this excluded location (the hostel for non-payers in the Okružní Street) were generally tense. Although the social and financial situation of inhabitants could have appeared to an external observer to be roughly at the same level; from the objective point of view, it is a real situation; however, inhabitants did not feel equal at all. The inhabitants living on the third floor (waiting for having a flat assigned) considered themselves to be more affluent and adaptable or possibly more superior to others – they did not speak to non-payers and they would not have coffee with them: “*People from three make differences, they feel they are better. It is true that people from the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor have more. I am friends rather with my sister-in-law and people from the 1<sup>st</sup> floor...*” (a female respondent, 35 years, České Budějovice).

Friends in relation with the provided social support represented, primarily, a source of its anticipated factor in connection with the young generation because they were creating significantly more friendly relationships (outside their extensive families) than the middle and older generations. We noticed no loans between friends but they were mentioned on several occasions in the sense if a friend would be granted a bank loan, s/he would surely lend me a part of the money. The non-financial support rather emerged in small things in comparison with the micro level – for instance, young mothers (friends) were giving stuff for children away to each other if any of them appeared in such a financial situation that she could not have bought her own new stuff. The young generation passed on the information on work offers (although it usually concerned seasonal or “cash in hand” work), which represented the primary source of the work offers at all and based on which other family members got some seasonal work later too.

Also the support provided by the community in the sense of other Roma people living in the location or close to it and being in no family relation with the respondent, rather had the anticipation character. We noticed no case of the received social support as it had not been sought in the first place. A certain anticipation potential was apparent, which cannot be disregarded because it represents at least the minimum security in case of any extreme life changes. It is demonstrated in the statement of one of our respondents: *“If anyone came from Slovakia, no one in the house would mind it. S/he would fit in. I would help”* (a male respondent, 21 years, České Velenice).

### ***State social policy as the macro level of the social support***

As the services provided by governmental and autonomous institutions, in particular, municipal offices (Social Department) and the Employment Bureau belonged to the services used often and regularly by a circle of unemployed respondents (specifically, by the majority of the adult target group), it also concerned two institutions, in which the respondents had a very little trust. They perceived them rather useless and almost repressive than supportive (or a provider of

the social support). A question remains why it is so. In connection with the Employment Bureau, the respondents stated more often that they had been registered there and did not believe in it substantially: *“I’m looking for work myself, the Bureau gives me recommendations and no one takes me in anyway”* (a female respondent, 38 years, Č. Budějovice).

However, we also encountered the respondents who were not making use of all benefits provided by the social system because their permanent residence was not arranged officially (compared with Sirovátká and Mareš 2006 stating a similar situation). The respondents stated that it did not appear beneficial for them to apply for benefits in case that any funds and time had to be expended in order to travel to the Bureau and the benefits were paid in arrears.

The “C” family used another source of the social support at the macro level. It concerned the services of a free time centre for the youth situated at the hostel’s premises and offered a programme for children as well as the social counselling to adults. The mother of this family was also a client of an Advisory Centre for Women and Girls in Need. These services were evaluated as useful and their activities were appreciated. However, when inquired, the respondents did not name who helped them if they found themselves in a problem situation. The “A” and “B” families had no similar services available in their place of residence. When inquired whether they would welcome any of them, they responded that they did not know and they could not have imagined their contents.

### ***Negative aspects of the social support***

The respondents perceived the social support negatively in case that they sensed a certain one-wayness, i.e. the provided support was not repaid to them sufficiently from their subjective point of view. Particularly, it concerned specific examples of the material social support: *“I have always given them some silver and all they bought for my twentieth birthday together was a t-shirt for CZK 90.– from the Vietnamese. I understand they have no money; I have already given them so much; I kept buying cigarettes for them when they had none, even snacks to take to work; but when they pulled some money*

*in, they have never invited me anywhere, it was even unpleasant for them to give me a fag*" (a female respondent, 23 years, talking about her female cousins, České Velenice).

We encountered the respondents who, at the moment when they had started their employment paying them relatively "decent" money, had spent a large portion of their wages on needs of the family, including the extensive relatives, and only a smaller portion was spent on their own needs (the close family). Afterwards, they perceived this custom as restrictive and it had a negative impact on their decision-making whether to remain in the employment or not. There is an example of a 23-year respondent available. He found himself a non-Roma female partner and moved with her away from his family to a municipal flat. His mother kept coming to visit daily and asking for funds for living for his younger siblings on many occasions. She always kept stating the fact that her son had a well-paid job of a bricklayer. The son was supporting his mother financially for about half a year because it was natural for him. Then, disagreements with his partner started as she perceived the situation as he was taken advantage of on purpose and they had insufficient funds for running of their own household at the month end. The situation was resolved by the respondent terminating his employment because it had been bringing him personally (according to his statement) only stress and disagreements in both his direct and procreative families.

## DISCUSSION

The above stated interpretation of the outcome indicates a fairly high degree of the social support provided in the Roma families living in the social exclusion. Therefore, it is impossible to relate the results to the entire Roma population because, for instance, the Roma elite may behave completely differently and their social support does not have to be economically oriented only.

The question remains, to which degree the established situation is the result of the social exclusion and related poor socio-economic situation; in other words, a certain necessity (e.g. higher classes have an opportunity to

obtain a bank loan and the excluded have none – compared with Steiner 2004) deepening the family bonds due to greater need of help; or whether it is the result of higher concentration of relatives in the close proximity of the excluded families? We rather tend to the version of the economic necessity, which supports the findings that the social support of higher classes of the Roma people is not restricted only to the Roma communities but it usually utilises external sources too as it is stated by Kajanová (2009); therefore, all three factors of the social support are represented in a more balanced manner.

The financial support identified as the most significant factor in the social support was the easiest factor to measure. Any potential distortion of the research could have been reached here in the sense of excessive emphasis put on this component.

In the cumulation of the problem factors so typical for the surroundings of the socially excluded location, even the social support loses some of its positive aspects. For instance, although increase in opportunities to acquire the employment via the social network (more lucrative work positions are usually recommended by relatives or friends) is spoken of, to the contrary, the opportunity for this support decreases with concentration of the unemployment in certain social groups because entire families often become unemployed (Sirovátká and Mareš 2006).

The social support is usually valued due to its protective impact on human mind when we are able to introduce defence against stress and anxiety already from the point of knowing of existence of the relations network. Some research (Nesvadbová et al. 2009) even states that the Roma people perceive the received support as excessive. However, we consider it important to draw your attention also to negative impacts of the social support in connection with the social exclusion when we are able to introduce the stressor to the contrary in case that a providing individual has not completely identified himself with the support and it is only required from him by his family (community), and in case that provision of the support represents restrictions in his/her own life. The example is the above mentioned cycle of providing the financial support that may be perceived negatively as it has a demotivational effect

at the moment when a person decides on entering the official labour market.

Therefore, the social support provided in the socially excluded Roma communities represents a certain security for an individual that s/he would not end up in an unbearable economic situation but it also prevents him/her from cumulating the capital, which is redistributed among needy family members even at times when the extensive Roma family is divided into individual households (even then, individual households lend funds to each other), which is nowadays more and more obvious.

## **CONCLUSION**

If we return to the three levels of the social support, the micro level seems the most dominant, also being a link between the cultural and economic factors of social life of the Roma people. According to our assumption, the family represented the primary source of the social support in the target groups. Also the social contacts were limited solely to the family too. There were minimum bonds outside the family and they referred rather to the young generation that looked for friends and partners among the Roma people with the same social position.

In the family as well as at the mezzo level, the respondents were both the recipients and providers of the social support to a quite balanced degree.

The Roma family has undergone certain changes recently and copies trends in the

majority family to a certain extent. However, the crisis, which sociology mentions in connection with the majority family (Suller 1998, de Singly 1999, Možný 2006), is not so distinct in the Roma people so far; for instance, we do not encounter mothers as sole wage earners or placement of seniors in institutions to such a degree.

In case of the mezzo level, it is necessary to draw your attention to disparity in statements made by the researched families, which, in our opinion, reflects the frequent heterogeneity of the population in the socially excluded locations; in case that it concerns more various families, a certain distance is created between them (Hirt and Jakoubek 2006). This level is also distinguished by generations.

From the point of view of the macro level, starting with the social benefits and social services, the social support represented a significant financial source for all surveyed families and a non-financial source (in the form of services) for the "C" family. It concerned the instrumental support, which was available on the regular basis. However, the respondents did not consider these opportunities as the social support.

To sum up both the positive and negative aspects established in regard with the social support of the socially excluded Roma people, it is necessary to point out that its protective character prevails. In other words, it represents a source of the financial income that circulates in the community, and then a source of information and, last but not least, of mutual relations that fulfil the social and emotional needs of human beings.

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