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THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION
Case studies about one scientific and one rural community

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A summary of theses

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Antecedents and background of the research

In the past twenty years, I have participated in approximately forty large research projects. Many of these programs and especially the large-scale quantitative investigations aimed at revealing the situation of the Roma people and explaining why members of this minority were mostly the victims of social exclusion. These and even further important scientific research programs strongly built upon the key concept of social exclusion. However, I always considered the term problematic as

1. it was contested and had multiple meanings. In 1997, Else Oyen already pointed at the unfounded character of the term emphasising that new entrants of the field *'pick up the concept and are now running all over the place arranging seminars and conferences to find a researchable content in an umbrella concept for which there is limited theoretical underpinning'* (p. 63). Murard also described the concept as not *'an empty box given by the French state to the social sciences in the late 1980s as a subject to study... The empty box has since been filled with a huge number of pages, treatises and pictures, in varying degrees academic, popular, original and valuable'* (2002, p. 41).

Despite the process of the 'filling' of the concept is still contested nowadays. As Saraceno put it *'what social exclusion means is about far from being univocally achieved'* (2001, p.3). Atkinson and Hills also emphasised (while citing Weinberg and Ruano-Borbalan) that *'reading numerous enquiries and reports on exclusion reveals a profound confusion amongst experts'* (1998, p. 13). Other scholars pointed at the lack of an adequate definition and scientific conceptualization of the term as well. Some of them emphasised that 'social exclusion' was often seen as a potential result of a number of risk factors – without the result explicated by precise and accurate definition (Atkinson and Hills 1998, Jehoel-Gijsbers and Vrooman 2007, Levitas et al. 2007, Shaaban 2011). Yet others underlined that the picture was also blurred because the words changed their meanings when they crossed borders and thus created dissimilarities in interpretation

(Estiviil 2003, Ferge 2002, de Haan 1999). The lack of an exact definition can be recognized even by the titles of scientific articles, such as the '*Social exclusion: a concept in need of definition?*' (Peace 2001) and '*The Problematic Nature of Exclusion*' (Sibley 1998).

All of these factors may result in the confusion that is verified even by those long lists summarising the definitions of 'social exclusion'; Mathieson introduces altogether 13 definitions from the academic and further 5 descriptions from the governmental/intergovernmental field (Mathieson et al 2008, p. 86) while Levitas summarises altogether 12 explanations (Levitas et al 2007, p. 21) for the same term. It should be emphasised that not only the academic but the political field has also failed to support perspicacity. Although, the concept has been widely adopted across Europe and it has become one of the fundamental ideas of the European Union policies and social policy. However, the meanings of the term have been unstable and a consistent theoretical underpinning has been still lacking (Daly, 2006).

It should also be recalled that disturbance regarding the meaning of the concept is supported by scientific disciplines as well. Sociologists, cultural anthropologists, social psychologists, psychologists, economists, political scientists, criminologists and lawyers use the term frequently – even if they refer to different phenomena sometimes. On the contrary, some of the disciplines describe the same phenomena while using not only (or not solely) the term 'social exclusion'. For example, economists use the term 'discrimination' while describing only one dimension of exclusion; the way specific social groups are blocked from the job market. Legal texts also refer to 'discrimination' while recognising forms of segregation, exclusion, harassment or victimisation violating the requirement of equal treatment. Social workers prefer the term 'deprivation' (and further, more complex forms of deprivations as 'social deprivation', 'relative deprivation' or 'multiple deprivation') while introducing the depth and characteristics of poverty, disadvantages, lack of resources and social exclusion. Experts of social policy also use 'deprivation' – for example when they measure the degree of inequality by different statistical-based indices (as the Robin Hood, Theil, Atkinson index, the Gini Coefficient or several alternatives and

variations). Several times sociologists use ‘discrimination’ and ‘social exclusion’ as synonyms while investigating the action or practice that differentiates on the basis of some ascribed or perceived characteristics of individuals or social groups. Social psychology and psychology give varied descriptions while defining the reactions of human beings on ‘social exclusion’. However, a lot of studies about this issue build upon various terms, such as ‘marginalisation’, ‘discrimination’, ‘rejection’, ‘oppression’, ‘bullying’, ‘abuse’, ‘ostracism’ or ‘ignorance’. It was Byrne who provided the most precise summary of the descriptions of the terminologies of the different scientific fields when calling attention to the fact that *‘social exclusion’ is not simply a term in social politics. It is also a central concern of social science. However, there is a problem. The academic debate on social exclusion provides an excellent illustration of the problems posed by the reification of disciplinary boundaries within the contemporary academy [...] There is a cross-discipline/-field debate and discussion about this topic, but it remains at best only partially coherent, primarily because there are fundamental dissonances in the way in which the processes of social change, which can be subsumed under the heading of “social exclusion”, are conceptualized and, above all else, measured.* (2005, p. 3-4)

2. scholars using the term “social exclusion” primarily interpret processes at the macro level but they focus at the micro level, where groups are formed and group-members communicate and interact with each other in their everyday life, only to a very limited extent. However, as an active researcher who often got in contact with local communities and conducted many empirical research programs, I frequently recognised exclusionary practices at the micro level and faced not only the manifestations of exclusion but the consequences of this practice and the motives behind it. All in all, I felt the presence of a gap between the theoretical professional literature analysing the phenomenon of social exclusion primarily at the macro level and the experiences that I gained during my field works.

Research goals

The primary aim of my dissertation is (1) to find an answer for the diversity of terminologies and approaches of social exclusion and (2) to identify the core elements of the term. In addition, I would like to (3) describe the way social exclusion of the Roma minority operates at the macro level and most specifically (4) to identify some factors in the micro level that tempt group-members to exclude 'others'. Finally, (4) I intend to deepen my knowledge about a specific group, the community of social scientists, while analysing their reactions on deviation.

Research methods

I examined the professional literature while describing the roots, definitions and interpretations of the term of social exclusion. The summary about the situation of the Roma people in Hungary was also based on the analyses of the professional literature.

The dissertation introduces the everyday life of a Hungarian village where an action research program was implemented by the Foresee Research Group within the framework of the ALTERNATIVE program¹. The research team started to prepare the field work at the end of 2011 and were working there until May 2015. During these years we built – good relationships and mutual trust with the members of the local community. The trust-building was supported by the researchers while applying various research methods of sociology. However, the role of the mediators was even more crucial; they got in contact with the local residents, evolved personal relationships with them and thereby were often personally involved in the everyday life of the community.

Without trust researchers would have not been able to analyse the key issues of the action research: 1) the characteristics of the local groups 2) the

¹ Developing alternative understandings of security and justice through restorative justice approaches in intercultural settings within democratic societies. For more information go to: www.alternativeproject.eu.

conflicts and conflict management strategies – even the practice of social exclusion – of the observed community. The initiative was successful, as at the end of the almost four-years-long field work a clear picture emerged of the groups of the village, reasons behind harms, disputes and misunderstandings. In addition, information about the way social exclusion works in the community also became available.

Qualitative methods have become wide-spread in the last few decades mainly in the USA and in Europe (Thiollent 2011). In the opinion of representatives of this method, usage of qualitative techniques can also support understanding, explanation and can also provide excellent tools for describing mainly smaller communities. Partly, this was the reason why we, throughout our work, applied tools of the qualitative method, such as interviews, focus groups, participation and observation (Hera and Ligeti 2005).

Here, not only the methods themselves but also our approach should be defined. The orientation of the research team was based on action research which is an umbrella term that represents several practices. In case of action research the researchers not only gain information from the field, they not only conduct studies on the target group. On the contrary, the researchers form *'partnerships with community members to identify issues of local importance, develop ways of studying them, collect and interpret data, and take action on the resulting knowledge'*. (Smith et al. 2010, p. 408) One of the keywords here is action. Researchers are not only objective observers who do not influence the field and who are not influenced by the field or by their own prejudices, stereotypes and ideas. Rather, the aim of the researchers is *'to effect desired change as a path to generating knowledge and empowering stakeholders.'* (Huang 2010, p. 93) All in all, the researchers do not have to make a distinction between action and understanding.

Within the framework of the ALTERNATIVE project, the research team prepared around 80 interviews with local residents. In the beginning of the program, we used the snow-ball method in order to get in contact with interviewees and used a semi-structured interview guideline. At that time,

the date of the conversations were fixed in advance, were usually 1-1.5 hours long and were in most cases recorded and afterwards transcribed. Later on, several spontaneous and not-structured interviews were also prepared in the field.

Another information source was the analysis of the secondary data. All kinds of information about the village was collected from libraries, internet, local residents, local newspapers and local government. Moreover, we were present there, on the field. Members of the research team took part in events, such as the Charity Ball of the Catholic Church, soccer games, Roma Day, graduation, consecration of a local monument etc. After participatory observation, our experiences were summarised in research diaries.

We did not only collect information but shared the gained knowledge and experience with the residents of the village. We organised three workshops where the findings of the action research program were introduced. Here, local residents asked questions, shared their feedbacks with the researchers and even criticized the process or conclusions of the research.

The dissertation introduces another case study while revealing the way social exclusion emerges and causes clashes in the social scientist community in Hungary. In order to understand the participants' personal attitudes, motivations and interests, empirical fieldwork was conducted in this case too. I prepared seven semi-structured interviews between 2010 and 2012, participated in a roundtable discussion organised by the Institute of Sociology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, initiated informal personal discussions, organised a radio talk show program with participants involved in the debate, and used electronic sources, such as e-mails, published and non-published materials as well.

New scientific findings

After introducing the findings of my empirical field works and summarising the experiences of the analysis of the professional literature

1. I point at the reasons for the diversity of terminologies and approaches of social exclusion and emphasise that a) the term was first introduced as a political concept without an adequate definition and conceptualization and b) different political, ideological, historical roots that created their own distinct interpretations also caused disturbance regarding the meaning of the concept.
2. I reveal the core elements of the term under investigation as the
 - a) multidimensional aspect, emphasising that social exclusion emerges at more than one dimension at the same time resulting in inequality, negative consequences on quality of life, well-being and future life chances.
 - b) dynamical aspect, warning about the importance of the process by which the exclusion from social relationships results in further deprivations and thereby further decreasing of the living opportunities.
 - c) relational aspect, introducing the importance of social relationships and the need to the comparison with others.
3. I give evidences of the various forms of social exclusion affecting the Roma people in Hungary (Hera 2015⁽¹⁾, Hera - Szeger 2015⁽²⁾, Fremlova - Georgescu - Hera - Marin - Miletic 2014⁽³⁾, Kiss - Szeger - Hera 2013⁽⁴⁾). However, by describing the everyday life of a Hungarian village in details and a debate in the community of the social scientists, I even point at the importance of analysing the norms, values and aims of the various groups at the micro level and of understanding the circumstances that amplify the tension between these groups of interests and make the intension of exclusion stronger.
4. I come to the conclusion that
 - a) in-group favouritism,
 - b) negative emotions that arise due to the intense debate,
 - c) deviation from the group norms,

d) clashes of the powerful groups of interests (that hide behind the scene of ‘interethnic conflicts’) (Hera 2013⁽⁵⁾) and
e) the lack of open communication which creates stereotypes
have the capacity to intensify the process of social exclusion.
Finally, my dissertation introduces science as a practice that is not organised by objective, independent and neutral researchers but a social activity that is operated by human actors who are influenced by norms, personal biases and emotional involvement (Hera, in press⁽⁶⁾).

Expidence of new scientific results

My dissertation does not only confirm some previously established theories but expands the scope of professional literature and even contributes to the knowledge about social exclusion. In addition, the findings of my research work may even be able to support professionals – e.g. policy makers, community activists, social workers and mediators – who aim to drive back exclusion, oppression and discrimination and intend to work for an inclusive society. Moreover, I believe that the study can join the efforts of the representatives of science studies and refine the widely accepted image about science.

Publications by the author related to the theses

- (1) Hera, G. (2015) The relationship between Roma and Police: a Roma Perspective. *Policing and Society*. Online version: 24th July 2015.
- (2) Hera, G. and Szeger, K. (2015) Education for Democratic Citizenship and Social Inclusion in a Post-Socialist Democracy. In: Majhanovich, S. and Malet, R. (eds.) *Building Democracy through Education on Diversity*. Rotterdam - Boston - Taipei: Sense Publisher. p. 41-57.
- (3) Fremlova, L. and Georgescu, M. and Hera, G. and Marin, L-G. and Miletic, G. (2014) Barabaripen. Young Roma speak about multiple discrimination. Strasbourg: European Youth Centre.
- (4) Kiss, J. and Szeger, K. and Hera, G. (2013) Prejudices, social competencies and political orientations in relation to schools' hidden curriculum. *Intercultural Education*. 24(3), 277-287.
- (5) Hera, G. (2013) Roma and non-Roma conflicts in the light of power relationships. *Temida* 16(3-4), 95-115.
- (6) Hera, G. (in press) Science, as the subject of historical and social analysis - a case study. *Periodica Polytechnica*.

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