“Struggle” for Trust – Unintended Consequences of an “Integration Project”

Markéta Levinská, Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové, Hradec Králové, Czech Republic
David Doubek, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Education, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT
This article has resulted from multiple years of cooperation of the research team Bittnerová, Doubek, and Levinská that examines issues related to Roma education in the context of social exclusion. Its main topic is to search for an understanding and interpretation of the failure of the project aiming to develop a social centre intended to serve as a basis for providing social services to needy residents of the researched site. The failure of “integration” is not just the refusal of embracing intercultural differences but the symbolic refusal of the impoverished status of the whole town, with the local Roma being the most glaring symbol of that impoverishment. This theoretical point is the theory of cultural models of Strauss and Quinn. “Romahood” is seen as a radial family resemblance category driven by a prototype in the context of distributed culture.

KEYWORDS
Cognitive Anthropology, Cultural Models, Ethnography, Helping Professions, Roma, Social Exclusion

INTRODUCTION
This paper is based on the work that research team Bittnerová, Doubek, & Levinská (2011) conducted during two long-term research projects that examined issues related to Roma education in the context of social exclusion in the Czech Republic. The first project (2008–2011) dealt with the issue of education related concepts that Roma parents, pupils, and their non-Roma teachers use (Project name “The Function of Cultural Models in Education”; GA CR grant no. 406/08/0805, 2008–2011). The second project (2012–2015) was focused on the mediation role of helping to provide professionals that work with people who are socially excluded. (“Decision-making processes of helping professions in the sphere of intercultural relations”, GA CR, grant no. P407-12-0547; 2012–2015). Both projects were essentially anthropological fieldwork that focused on one town and its surroundings. This fieldwork, covering 8 years of research, provided an exceptional insight into one community and unexpectedly led to the event that is the subject of this article. The event was something unforeseen and while it was in many regards outside of the original focus (cultural models) it could not be ignored, as it was also in many regards tightly interconnected with the issues focused on, particularly the issue of the relationship between the Roma and the majority of the Czech population and the work of helping professions. A popular referendum taking place in 2013 refusing an EU funded government project aimed at helping the socially excluded was a highly symbolic precursor for things to come both locally and globally in context. To understand it is maybe the key to understand the 2017 general elections in the Czech Republic and the overall political shift in the society.
METHODOLOGY AND ETHICS OF THE RESEARCH

As previously stated, the research was conceived as an anthropological fieldwork based on participant observation, interviews, and the collection of supplemental data from various sources. The original research focus was on the “cultural models” as understood in cognitive anthropology (more below) and because of that the main data came from interviews. There was also a deep interest in the context; because of this many other sources of data were relied upon, such as observation, social media, analysis of various documents including the municipal Memorial Book, local newspapers available both in printed and online forms accessible on the town’s website. Documents published by the Agency for Social Inclusion and reports by other researchers or students, who had conducted research at the site, were also used.

Entry into the community was facilitated by the fact that members of this research study were in friendly relationship with several members in the Roma community who provided introductions to other individuals at various social positions (schools, NGOs, neighbours, the local political scene) from which moment independent networking was able to be started. Since an early contact and friend was the former Mayor, close contact in the social-political universe of the community was able to be achieved. Quite early on, Roma contacts were able to be built thanks to a very able Roma social worker who gave introductions to local Roma communities. From the early stages of this research project, operations were conducted independently out of the “mayoral shadow” as initially provided by the friend.

From the beginning, it was soon learned that trust needed to be built and it was wise to avoid any forced formal procedures. During this period a distinct way of relaxed, long, and wide-ranging interviews developed to suit informants. This approach was later also used for interviews with helping professionals. “Informal” means these interviews were open to improvisation, even playfulness, but the informants were always thoroughly informed who the interviewers were and what university and projects they worked for. Participation was completely voluntary and agreed to by the informants. To protect these informants, thorough anonymization was used, and so in no published account real names of the place or people are used. Monographs were always provided for comments so that the participants knew the finished product.

The interviews could be several hours long and sometimes there were only two people speaking, but more often there were several speakers. When the interviews took place in Roma households, there was arguing, discussions, jokes and all kinds of human talk.

The event this paper tries to describe took place unexpectedly and simultaneously as the planned research was conducted and therefore will be included in the questioning and observation portions of this paper. To fully understand the situation, more extensive research would be needed, and the claims made within this paper are by no means the best or most comprehensive.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Cultural Models

Initially, before the referendum event caught many by surprise, working concepts were employed first by the Roma towards education and schooling and then concepts on which helping professionals based their interactions with clients from socially excluded localities. To understand these concepts, the theory of cultural models was employed. The notion of cultural models was introduced by cognitive anthropology, one of the sciences trying to fill the gap between anthropology and psychology (Lindholm, 2007). Some scientists suggest the concept of cultural models as suitable basic units for analyses that allows overcoming the schism between the concepts of “culture” and “psyche” (Shore, 1996). Cultural models (schemas, ICMs—idealized cognitive models) are means of thinking used by people for reasoning and for organizing their mental and external social world. They are typically understood as a kind of template, as conventional or idealized forms that enable people to categorize,
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