

## Prejudices, social change, and diversity: theoretical insights and research findings under review<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*The question and the academic concern regarding the conceptualization of diversity and prejudices as well as the importance of inclusion and the consequences of social exclusion are quite old. Mainly in the last decades, since 1990, the social policies of the European Union mostly focused on diversity and especially on the inclusion of the Roma. The current paper aims at contributing to the understanding of the new cultural circumstances (mainly due to the influx of thousands of refugees from Asian and Sub-Saharan African countries), which public servants, administrative staff or teachers all over South Europe (especially Greece) are grappling with.*

### Keywords

diversity, Roma, prejudices, citizenship

### Introduction

Western democracies and subsequently educational systems have become increasingly concerned with diversity and inclusion. Today a common topic amongst sociologists, social policy experts, educators, politicians etc., is the need to understand the new cultural circumstances, which public servants, administrative staff or teachers all over South Europe and especially Greece, are grappling with which are mainly due to the influx of thousands of refugees from Asian and Sub-Saharan African countries.

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However, the questions and the academic concern regarding the conceptualization of diversity and prejudice and most of all the importance of inclusion and the consequences of social exclusion are quite old. Mainly in the last decades, since 1990, European Union social policies focused on diversity and especially on the inclusion of the Roma. Despite the intense concern of national and European policies and the effort of social workers and teachers in the classroom, publication of scientific findings and studies, such as the European Union Minorities and discrimination Survey -EU MIDIS (2008), underline the discrimination experiences against the Roma population.

The present paper centers on the integration of the Roma population in society, which though is a highly desirable, it nevertheless appears to be a contested concept in social policy and constitutes an important challenge for the modern western welfare state. Firstly, deepening the cohesion and quality of modern western societies depends on the success of inclusion policies for diversity (especially ones concerning the Roma population) but mainly on the understanding of the concept of diversity. According to our study, overwhelming prejudices can reframe our social and political relations and characterize the quality of modern citizenship.

### **Purpose and significance of the study**

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the understanding of the new cultural circumstances (mainly due to the influx of thousands of refugees from Asian and Sub-Saharan African countries), which public servants, administrative staff or teachers all over South Europe (especially Greece) are grappling with. The questions and the academic concern regarding the conceptualization of diversity and prejudices and most of all the importance of inclusion and the consequences of social exclusion are quite old. Mainly the last decades, since 1990, European Union social policies focused on diversity and especially on the inclusion of the Roma.

### **Research question**

The current study aims to approach and examine the negative attitudes of public servants towards the Roma population as well their capability to respond to the emerging demands of rapidly changing attitudes and behaviors in a liquid framework because of the refugee crisis.

The central research question of the study focuses on whether Greek medical staff, primary education teachers, and administrative staff showed different attitudinal

and behavioral responses towards the Roma population as compared to their attitudes towards the Greek population. In addition, the current study also explores:

- What are the attitudes, fears, intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes towards the Roma?
- What differences are reflected between the three professional groups (i.e., teachers, medical staff, administrative staff)?

Finally, this paper reports on a study of 582 members of the medical staff. The research was carried out at the Thriasio General Hospital of Elefsina. Additionally, it reports on 248 primary teachers and 117 employees of the municipality of Aspropyrgos who participated in this attitudes survey. All of them were Greek, 419 were women and 163 men.

### **Theoretical background: Diversity and decline of the Greek Welfare State**

The financial crisis and the retreat of the welfare state in most of the European countries and especially in Greece, with its consequent impact on the sectors of Health and Education, entail, among other things, a particular re-allocation of the terms related to the debate on diversity (Gouga & Spinthourakis, 2018). Today, the juncture from which the decline of the Greek Welfare State is produced can be labeled as a *debt crisis*.

However, the apparent dominion of economic neoliberalism over the Greek Welfare State (best illustrated by the debt crisis) is one of the strongest indicators of economic determinism in the lives of everyday citizens.

At the end of his 1944 work, *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi pointed out that the operative moment in which market failure is combined with political paralysis, has totalitarianism as its end product (pp. 231-244). Market liberalization, coupled with the economic relationships between local and global realities in the 1980s resulted in extensive deregulations in Europe. As a result, the process of gaining public goods and taking part in decision-making that shapes the public sphere (formerly guaranteed by the European Social State) is no longer assured.

Due to the debt and the refugee crisis, the need for multicultural education and respect of diversity is greater than ever (Banks, 2004). Multiculturalism becomes a contemporary issue. The continuous mobility both in the real world and in the virtual space is reflected the term globalization. Culture is not geographically limited anymore. Multiple interactions among users of the internet and SNS specifically may lead to an amelioration of intercultural sensitivity. Sharing personal experiences

could represent one of the practices that lead to an understanding multiculturalism. In order to focus on multiculturalism, social communication must play a key role. Multiculturalism refers to a way of viewing reality through multiple practices and methods, so if we integrate SNS in multicultural education, we could achieve higher levels of intercultural sensitivity (Banks, 1993; Gorski, 2002).

Chen & Starosta (1997, 2000) developed a theoretical model of Intercultural Sensitivity (IS). Intercultural sensitivity is considered a necessary ability for effective communication and interaction with people from different cultures (Bennett & Bennett, 1993; J. A. Spithourakis et al., 2009; Tamam, 2010). Among the three aspects (i.e., cognitive, affective and behavioral) of intercultural communication, IS is considered as the affective side which describes the “active desire to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate and accept differences among cultures” (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p.231).

## **Methodological approach and Research design**

As already stated, this paper reports on a study of 582 members of the medical staff. The research was carried out at the Thrasio General Hospital of Elefsina. Additionally, it reports on 248 primary teachers and 117 employees of the municipality of Aspropyrgos that participated in this attitudes survey. All of them were Greek, 419 were women and 163 men.

As a quantitative approach, a questionnaire exploring the attitudes of public servants toward the Roma population was developed by the research team.

The survey instrument was built with reference to the prior surveys conducted by Stephan et al. (1999) *Prejudice Toward Immigrants*<sup>2</sup>. The instrument collected data about public servants’ attitudes toward Roma and consisted of two sections:

- a. demographic characteristics.
- b. public servants’ attitudes (i.e., symbolic fears, intergroup stress, negative stereotypes).

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<sup>2</sup> See: Stephan, W.G., Ybarra, O. and Bachman, G. (1999) Prejudice toward immigrants, *Journal of applied Social Psychology*, 29(11): 2221-2237

## **Findings and discussion**

According to Eurobarometer data, Europeans recognize the existence of negative attitudes toward the Roma population. For instance, 40% answered that “they would not feel comfortable if their children at school had Roma classmates.” 75% agree that “the Roma are a social group at high risk of discrimination.”

Despite the intense concern of national and European policies and the effort of social workers and teachers in the classroom, publication of scientific findings and studies such as the European Union Minorities and discrimination Survey -EU MIDIS (2008), underline the discrimination experiences against the Roma population.

As stated by Stephan and Stephan (1993), a threat belief can produce prejudices and negative attitudes toward the minority group. Stephan and Stephan identified four types of threats that could lead to prejudice: real fears, symbolic fears, stereotypes, and intergroup stress.

According to our data almost 9 out of a 10 (91,8%) participants stated that they don't trust the Roma (“Roma are not trustable”). Also, almost 7 out of a 10 (70,6%) answered “Roma don't deserve any respect.” Furthermore, 68,8% stated that “the Roma are a small social group whose members share close, personal, enduring relationships,” 34,4% “Roma are aggressive,” and 77,3% participants stated that “the Roma are not honest people.” Finally, 51.5% feel a relative to absolute rejection of the Roma.

### **Symbolic fears**

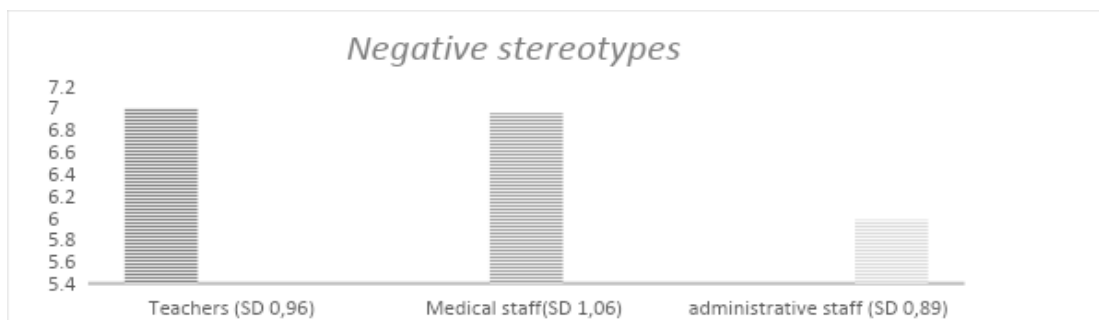
According to our research, almost 8 out of 10 (82.3%) have a relative or even absolute belief that the values of the Roma on moral issues are not compatible with the values and perceptions of other Greeks. Also almost 7 out of 10 (78.7%) have a relative to absolute belief that the Roma are obliged to accept the way of life adopted by other Greeks. Furthermore, 51.1% have a relative to absolute belief that the Roma undermine the culture of the rest of the Greeks.

### **Stereotypes**

According to our research, almost 9 out of 10 (91.8%) have a relative to absolute conviction that the Roma are not trustworthy. Almost 70.6% participating in the sample stated that they have a relative to absolute belief that Roma are not worthy of respect. 68.8% stated that they are absolutely convinced that the Roma are a

closed social group who develop only relations with each other. Moreover, 34.4% stated that they are absolutely convinced that the Roma are aggressive and finally, 77.3% have a relative to absolute belief that the Roma are not honest.

Table 1 : Negative Stereotypes (mean)



## Conclusion

We have presented thoughts and data aimed at promoting a better understanding of the stakes of redefining social policy under the impact of prejudices as an everyday practice of members of the medical staff, primary teachers and employees of the municipality. The redefinition of social policy under the prism of everyday practices can in turn facilitate greater insight into efficiency processes and efficacy, as the final challenge faced by modern educational processes for the cohesion of the public sphere within daily life in a democratic European society is quite evident.

More concretely, the present paper aimed at promoting a better conceptualization of the processes of introduction and integration of diversity (with respect to the Roma population) as a highly desirable but contested concept in social policy and as an important challenge for the modern western Welfare State. Deepening the cohesion and quality of modern western societies depends on the success of the inclusion policies for diversity and especially for the Roma population, but mainly on the understanding of the conceptualization of diversity. According to our study, the overwhelming of prejudices reframes our social and political relations and characterize the quality of modern citizenship.

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