

Claimed Consensus as a Means of Justification of Hostile Stereotypes Against the Roma Minority Among Hungarian Policemen

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This paper deals with some of the results of an empirical investigation into the nature of stereotypes concerning the Roma minority held by Hungarian policemen. The research was carried out in 1996 in a representative sample of Hungarian policemen. This report is based on a longer and more complete report which was drafted by the author in collaboration with Antal Örkény and Mária Székelyi.

The sample consisted of 1529 respondents and was stratified according to the degree of probability of encounter with members of the Roma minority which number approximately 7-800,000 in a country with population of ten and half million inhabitants.

In light of the results of this study representation of Roma minority on behalf of the Hungarian policemen can be characterized as profoundly negative. Seventy-one percent of the respondents held the view that “where there are no Gypsies around it is less difficult to work as a policeman.” Fifty-four percent of the policemen maintained that being a Gypsy and being a criminal are highly correlating aspects of the social identity of the minority under consideration. Moreover, 80 percent of the respondents believe that the recognized type and way of the criminal act give strong cues in inferring the criminal’s minority identity. Members of the Roma minority are represented by a majority of policemen in terms of propensity to commit criminal acts due to lack of respect for law, abuse of opportunities provided by social policy and genetic inclination to be involved in deviant behavior. Cultural distancing to the degree of dehumanization was found to be rampant among the respondents. Theft, aggressiveness, lack of morals were identified by policemen as the basic tenets of the stereotypes concerning the traits of Roma inaccessible to direct experience. As to the traits more accessible to direct experience, traits such as loud and obscene speech, and accent were mentioned, and visual characteristics related to skin color, type of face, peculiar clothing were stressed. As a rule policemen had a tendency to exaggerate the number of Roma minority. As it is demonstrated below in *Table I*, exaggeration has permeated minority population estimates of past, present and future.

Table I

Actual and estimated proportions of Roma minority reported by Hungarian policemen.

	actual proportion	estimated proportion
1976	2-3%	11 %
1996	5-6%	18.5%
2016	-	31 %

While the tendencies of hostile representation and fearful demographic expectation concerning the Roma minority among Hungarian policemen were to be found rather general, the variable of probability of encounter with members of the minority had exerted a profound effect on stereotyping and estimation. Enhanced likelihood of encounter induced more hostility and more fearfulness among policemen.

Several strategies of justification of hostility against the minority were observed among the respondents such as self-pity, reluctance to being self-critical, blaming the victim, and scapegoating the media. Most widespread, however, was the strategy of claiming social consensus in maintaining hostile stereotypes. Seventy-eight percent of the respondents felt that there is a strong public pressure inciting them to severe and harsh treatment when confronting members of Roma minority. In judging a legal case between a barkeeper and a Roma client 83 percent of the policemen characterized public opinion as anti-Roma.

In order to ascertain the role of claimed consensus in justifying one's own anti-Roma stereotypes, three statements were selected which have emphasized different aspects of the anti-Roma representation. The first statement referred to the role of genes in determining the increased frequency of delinquent behavior among members of the Roma minority. The second statement implied that poverty of this minority can be attributed mainly to moral and psychological defaults such as loose morals and laziness. Implying the stereotype of aggressiveness, the third statement stressed that in dealing with members of Roma minority there is no viable alternative to force for a policeman.

The genetic explanation of delinquent Roma behavior was favored by 50 percent of the respondents. Seventy-three percent of the same respondents, however, thought that their colleagues held the thesis of genetic determination, and even higher (80 percent) was the proportion of those who maintained that this is the dominant view among the adult population. While only 48 percent of the policemen have agreed with the conservative statement blaming the Gypsies for their poverty, 64 percent perceived that this is the dominant view among their fellow policemen and 71 percent believed that the public holds an anti-Gypsy stance on this issue. Gypsy aggressiveness, as a cause for harsh treatment was accepted by 35 percent of the respondents. In contrast, 52 percent have believed that the majority of policemen continues to perceive Gypsies as aggressive which necessarily leads to force dealing with them in relationships set by the roles of policeman-client. According to 64 percent of the respondents force has been thought to be major means of dealing with Gypsies as a result of expectation within society.

These results indicate that hostility and intolerance stemming from anti-Roma stereotypes have been justified by consensual attribution at least among some policemen who could rightly claim that their tolerance is at variance with the intolerance of their fellow policemen and the society as such. *Table 2* demonstrates the proportion of those respondents who tended to be congruent with their own opinion and those who attributed to their colleagues and the public the terms of intolerance and tolerance.

Table 2

Personal opinion, attributed majority policemen opinion and claimed public opinion concerning anti-Roma characteristics (percent)

	Countryside		Capital	
	low Roma	high Roma	low Roma	high Roma
complete intolerance	27	38	29	22
corporate intolerance	36	26	30	34
complete tolerance	15	11	13	11
corporate tolerance	27	25	28	34

Table 2 shows that respondents tend to cluster most frequently when in the spirit of intolerance there is a complete congruence between one's own opinion and those attributed to the majority of policemen (31 percent) and the public, or when at least partially, there is a congruence of the same kind between one's own and attributed corporate opinion (30 percent). The preponderance of these two clusters in the sample refer to the general tendency among respondents to alleviate the burden of being anti-Roma by creating a link of semblance of opinion with an anonymous majority. Not insignificant, however, the frequency of combination where tolerance on behalf of the individual respondent of that of the policemen corps conflicts with the intolerance attributed to the public (27 percent). Policemen in this group can be seen as tormented by internal personal tolerance, and external intolerance. The least frequent type is represented by the 12 percent of respondents who perceive tolerance in themselves as among their colleagues and in the society.

As the table shows, intolerance is dominant in all subsamples. Complete intolerance, however, more frequently can be found among policemen working in the countryside where the probability of encounter with members of Roma minority is high, while those rural districts where the likelihood of encounters with members of the Roma minority is relatively low, policemen are more inclined to perceive society as lacking pronounced anti-Roma stereotypes while they themselves and their colleagues tend to adhere to hostile representations of Roma. In the capital city policemen are more prone to perceive themselves as free of anti-Roma stereotypes in striking conflict with the attributed anti-Roma set on behalf of society. Only a minority of policemen believes in an Utopia where anti-Roma stereotypes are conspicuously lacking from the stock of knowledge of all the majority participants in the troubled relationship with the Roma minority.