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REPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOR, ETHNICITY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS A Comparison of two Serbian Gypsy Groups

Based on original fieldwork in Serbia, this paper elucidates and contrasts the reproductive behavior of typically poor Gypsies with a group of much wealthier Gypsies living in a Serbian village. This paper will test two hypotheses: 1) Gypsy reproductive behavior is a result of their ethnic, traditional strategy, and/or 2) Gypsy reproduction is a result of low status and being poor. This paper explores the relationship between socioeconomic status, reproductive behavior and ethnicity.

Key words: K/r-selection, Gypsies, socioeconomic status.

Introduction

A couple of studies¹ reported that the general Gypsy population was relatively „r-selected“ (more offspring, less parental care for each) when compared to non-Gypsy populations in Europe. These studies suggested the Gypsy r-strategy was a result of a mix of both genetic and cultural/traditional predispositions. „r“ and „K“ are symbols that are used to define two ends of a hypothetical continuum that involves a tradeoff between offspring production and parental care² Both r-and K-strategists have the same goal: the increase of their genes in succeeding generations. Humans are very K-selected when compared to other species, though some people and groups are more on the K end of the continuum than others. Some studies have proposed that in addition to genetic and traditional predispositions, people with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to have a K-strategy profile than those of lower status, as seen in variables such as sexuality, mortality, reproduction and health.³ Their argument is that differences in

¹ Berezkei, T. (1993). r-selected Reproductive Strategies Among Hungarian Gypsies. *Ethnology and Sociobiology*, 14:71–88; Čvorović, J. (2003). Sexual and Reproductive strategies among Serbian Gypsies. *Population & Environment*. Vol. 25(1), November 2003, 123–148.

² Rushton, J. P. (2000). *Race, evolution and behavior. A life history perspective*. Port Huron, MI: Charles Darwin Research Institute.

³ Jensen, A. R. (1985). The nature of black-white difference on various psychometric tests. Spearman's hypothesis. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 8: 193–263, Weinrich, J. D. (1977). Human sociobiology: pair bonding and resource predictability *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology*, 2:91–118; but see Rushton, J. P. & Bogaert, A. F. (1988). Race versus social class differences in sexual behavior: a follow-up test of r/K dimension. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 22: 259–272.

reproductive and sexual behavior are the result of differences in the stability of the social environment and resource predictability that are expected by people of different social status, and where education, income and profession play a major role.

This paper describes and contrasts the reproductive behavior of typically poor Gypsies with a group of much wealthier Gypsies living in a Serbian village. This is the first research to study the reproductive behavior of the rich Gypsy group.

In Europe, the Gypsy population tends to suffer disproportionately from higher rates of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, crime and disease. At the same time, Gypsies present a growing population in all parts of Europe: in the populations of the post-communist states Gypsies number between 3 and 10%, and their birth-rate is more than twice the national averages. There are two hypotheses that could explain Gypsy reproductive and sexual behavior.

The first:

Gypsies' sexual and reproductive behaviors are a result of their ethnic traditional strategy that encourages endogamy and high fertility. Gypsy ethnicity became a complex issue due to the historical and political circumstances they have encountered in Europe: most Gypsies do not consider themselves members of a unified group, but identify with the subgroup to which they belong, whose language and religion depend on its location and circumstances. In Central and Eastern Europe today, the only common distinctive feature these various Gypsy „tribes“ share is their pronatalist, endogamous tradition, which obviously has helped Gypsies so far to survive and leave descendants, retaining their group uniqueness at the same time. Therefore their situation, characterized by segregation and a low socio-economic position, could be in part, self-imposed. This results from their traditional refusal to accept, and become a part of the larger hierarchy of their host populations, where kinship remains an important basis of cooperation, especially in the Balkans, and where a lot of what passes for ethnicity at the local level is actually kinship. If this hypothesis is true, then wealth, socioeconomic status and environmental predictability will not have an affect on Gypsy reproductive strategy.

The second hypothesis:

The Gypsy pattern of reproduction is a result not of their traditions but of their poverty, characterized by high levels of fertility, illegitimacy, crime, illiteracy and welfare. The poor with high fertility have the assurance that the state welfare, or „transfer payments“ will keep their babies alive above the level of starvation.⁴ Gypsies' chances of upward mobility into the middle class are few and remote— they have almost no middle class to aspire to. Alternatively, to have an additional child is a source of income, for many Gypsies, maybe the only certain one. So, why not have more children? If this is true, then relatively better-off Gypsies, who do not need social assistance to live, will have fewer children than the general Gypsy population, and will invest more in each. One way of this investment would be to send Gypsy children to schools, so they could become integrated into society, find better jobs, etc.

The hypotheses were tested on Serbian Gypsies. The state of Serbia recently underwent the demographic transition, has large populations of Gypsies, and during the communist regime, its government pursued a pronatalist/welfare policy, which might be

⁴ Van den Berghe, P. L. (1979). Human Family Systems: an Evolutionary View. New York: Elsevier.

relevant to Gypsy birth rates today. Several levels of data collecting and analysis were employed to test the predictions listed above which include: fieldwork among two Gypsy groups, comparison of all data on demographic assessment, specific economic, cultural and social forces encouraging or discouraging high fertility and marriage patterns among Gypsies.

Background

Today, an official estimate of Serbia's true Gypsies range between 360,000 and 500,000, compared to 7,478,820. Serbs.⁵ There are at least eight subgroups/tribes of Roma/Gypsies, some of whom lost their Romani language so that their mother tongue is now Serbian. In the past, the characteristic of all Gypsy groups was that they did not mix with each other—there appeared to be a strongly emphasized antagonism among the groups. A system that divides these groups, much like a caste system, still exists in some parts of Serbia today. With respect to other Gypsies, especially in the past, allowable marriage choices were restricted. Gypsies were expected to marry someone within their particular tribe and most obeyed that marriage rule. Through centuries of Turkish rule, Gypsies were strictly endogamous: even the godfathers or best men at their weddings were Gypsies. Many tribes considered the children Roma only if the father is Roma.⁶ After Gypsy nomadic life came to an end, some intermarriage with Serbs occurred, although its incidence is low.

In Serbia, Gypsies occupy the lowest position on all socio-economic indicators: They are the most unemployed, the least educated, the poorest, the most welfare-dependent, and the most segregated.⁷ At the same time, they have the most children and the most divorces. In Serbia, Gypsies are associated with a variety of traits characteristic of a low-investment style of reproduction. When compared to Serbs, Gypsies have higher fertility, longer reproductive period, earlier onset of sexual behavior and reproduction, more unstable pair-bonds, higher rates of single-parenting, shorter intervals of birth spacing, higher infant mortality rate and higher criminality.⁸

The fieldwork was conducted in two Mačva villages in Western Serbia: Bramble and Cock. For the sake of informants' protection, and on their request, the real names of the villages are withheld and replaced with pseudonyms. The first village surveyed, Bramble, is unique in many ways: it is 100% ethnically pure, that is, inhabited only by Gypsies; also, the majority of Gypsies in this village are much wealthier than the rest of the Gypsy population in Serbia. The second village, Cock, on the other hand, is a typical poor Gypsy settlement. Gypsies in both villages belong to the Gurbeti Gypsy group. *Gurbet* is a Turkish word, and means „a beggar“; these Gypsies are also called Turkish Gypsies or Horaxane. They were Muslims until some 80 years ago. The two villages are approximately 30 miles apart.

⁵ Save the Children (2001). *Denied A Future? The Right To Education of Roma, Gypsy and Travelers Children*. Save the Children Fund. United Kingdom.

⁶ Djordjević, T. R. (1932). *Naš narodni život i običaji*. Knjiga VI. Beograd. Književna zadruga; Vukanović, T. (1983). *Romi (Cigani) u Jugoslaviji*. Vranje: Nova Jugoslavija.

⁷ Mitrović, A. (1990). *Na dnu. Romi na granicama siromaštva*. Beograd: Naučna knjiga.

⁸ Čvorović, J. (2003a). Sexual and Reproductive strategies among Serbian Gypsies. *Population & Environment*. Vol. 25(1), November 2003.

The village of Bramble: Rich Gypsy

This particular Gurbeti group came from Bosnia to Serbia in the late 19th century. They were nomadic and mostly blacksmiths. In 1948, there were exactly Gypsy 30 houses in the village of Bramble.⁹ Today, the village has approximately 350 houses inhabited by around 1600 Roma. The informants tell, half jokingly, that they „chased off“ the Serbs, and became a majority after WWII.

In many ways, this is an atypical village for Serbia: most streets are paved with asphalt, there is a radio station „Bramble“, and most houses are big, with excessive decoration, ornaments and sculptures. Some houses even have a swimming pool or a fountain, in spite of the shortages of running water in the area. Young teenage males riding their vespas are often seen. The wealth of these Gypsies comes from trade: during Tito's time, and especially in the 1990's, at the time of the Milosevic regime and sanctions against Serbia, this village was a meeting point of traders and blackmarket-dealers from Serbia and Bosnia. Many Gypsies from this village participated in legal and illegal trade of cattle, gasoline and tobacco. Among local Serbs from a nearby village Brdarice, this place is known as „the city of tobacco“: Gypsies here used to own and operate an illegal tobacco factory, producing Marlboro cigarettes which they sold around the region of the former Yugoslavia. Today, however, most of them live from cattle breeding and agriculture; unlike most Gypsies in Serbia, they are landowners. An interesting fact is that, in spite of their wealth, almost all families applied for a welfare allowance for a third child, but only around 20 families got some social assistance. Out of these 20, 3 families got financial support from the state because they have mentally retarded children.

In spite of their wealth, the reproductive pattern of these Gypsies seems to fit the general Gypsy population. They start sexual life early and enter endogamous marriages at an early age: females have to be virgins in order to get married, and a bride price goes up to several thousand euros. The educational level of most informants is low: most of them have only a few grades of elementary school, despite the school existing in their village. The average lifespan is around 65 years of age, which is below the Serbian national average. However, unlike the general Gypsy population in Serbia,¹⁰ divorce is very rare; informants justify this fact by saying that they don't have time to „fool around“ since most males work full time. For males, marriage with Serbs is often discussed: most of the informants say that they will happily trade with Serbs, marry their daughters, but would never „give away“ a Gypsy girl to a Serb. One male informant argued: „We usually don't marry outside our village. When we do, we bring females here; we don't give away our daughters. It's better that she marries someone poor in this village than a man I don't know. When we take women from other villages, even Serbs, we teach them how to behave, what to do. But we don't give our daughters to marry Serbs“. Actually, these Gypsies stay isolated from the Serbs and other Gypsy groups; they explain this fact by saying that they are unique, because they are capable of making money which in turn places them in a higher social position towards other Gypsy groups.

⁹ Radovanović, V. S. (1994). Šabačka Posavina i Pocerina: antropogeografska ispitivanja/12 terenskih beležnica. Priredila M. Radovanovic. Šabac.

¹⁰ Čvorović, J. (2003a). Sexual and Reproductive strategies among Serbian Gypsies. *Population & Environment*. Vol. 25(1), November 2003.

The village of Cock: Poor Gypsy

This village is also inhabited by a Gurbeti Gypsy group. The Gypsies in this village are poor. These Gypsies used to be basket-makers. There are around 56 Gypsy houses out of 300. The approximate number of Gypsies in this village is 450. The average number of individuals per household is 8. Until the war in 1991, they used to travel all over the former Yugoslavia and sell their products. Today, most of them scramble to survive: they do a little trading, work for Serbs on the land during the season, or wait for help from their relatives who went to Austria to work. Their reproductive cycle is typical for Gypsies: early, endogamous marriages, quick and ease divorce, and many children who grow up in acute poverty. When asked why they have so many children when they cannot feed them, one male informant argued: „Poor people always have time for sex and making babies—we don’t have anything else [a job] to do“. For example, one 40-year old female Gypsy gave birth to her 8th child this spring; she and her husband are both unemployed and live from begging in the village, helped by the husband’s occasional work. The average life expectancy is around 55 years, which is the average for the general Gypsy population in Europe.¹¹

As far as schooling, only 5 males had started secondary education; most of the villagers have never finished elementary school, and some are illiterate. None receive welfare because they are unemployed and many are not even registered with the officials, so they could not even qualify for social assistance.

Table 1. The comparison of the rich and poor Gypsy groups

	GENERAL GYPSY	RICH GYPSY GROUP	POOR GYPSY GROUP
Members per house	4.20	8.38	8.01
Av. Number of children	3.76	4.01	4.70
Age of first pregnancy	17.5	16.09	16.02
Age of first intercourse	na	15.50	15.05
Intercourse per week	na	2.62	4.02
Divorce	Frequent	Rare	Frequent
Education level	Low	Low	Low
never completed elementary. school	80%	68%	76%

¹¹ Reyniers, A. (1995). Gypsy populations and their movements within central and eastern Europe and towards some OECD countries. In *International Migration and Labour Market Policies: Occasional Papers No 1, Paris*.

Conclusion

The general Gypsy sample, and the information gathered from Gypsy settlements in Mačva support the generalization that Gypsies have adopted a relatively r-style reproductive strategy. The comparison of the data show that wealth, socioeconomic status and environment predictability have no effect on the Gypsy reproductive strategy. The data from these three samples correlate closely: there are almost no differences in the number of individuals per house, average age of first pregnancy and intercourse, number of children per family and educational level, in spite of the differences in wealth between the Gypsy groups. Therefore, Gypsies' sexual and reproductive behaviors might be a result of their ethnic traditional strategy that encourages endogamy and high fertility. Gypsy reproductive and sexual behavior might be the answer to life conditions their ancestors have met and lived in. Since their first appearance in the Balkans centuries ago, the Gypsies' main concern was how to survive, and outwit obstacles in life, which included persecution, enslavement and harassment. Gypsy traditions obviously have helped them in the past to leave descendants. This particular tradition of sexual and reproductive behavior was, for Gypsies, an inheritable and replicable trait, which tended to increase in frequency along with the descendants.

Deep social changes are needed for Gypsies to become integrated into modern European society. Gypsies' cultural and economic development, and the prevention of discrimination against them will only be successful if their traditions are better understood.

Јелена ЧВОРОВИЋ

РЕПРОДУКТИВНО ПОНАШАЊЕ, ЕТНИЦИТЕТ И СОЦИО-ЕКОНОМСКИ СТАТУС Поређење две групе Рома

Овај рад се бави поређењем и контрастом репродуктивних стратегија две групе Рома — Цигана који живе у Мачви: једна група је изузетно сиромашна, типична за ромску популацију уопште, а друга група је веома богата и нетипична за Роме у Србији, као и у свету. Такође, у раду се расправља о односу социоекономског статуса, репродуктивног понашања и етничитета. Тестиране су две хипотезе:

Прва хипотеза:

Репродуктивно понашање Рома је резултат њихове етничке традиционалне стратегије која поддржава ендогамију и високи фертилитет. Етничитет Рома постао је комплексно питање захваљујући историјским и политичким околностима које су Роми затекли у Европи. Данас, већина Рома не сматра себе припадницима једне кохерентне групације, него се појединци идентификују са под-групамa из којих су потекли, а чији језик и религија зависе од локације и срединских околности. У централној и источној Европи, једина заједничка карактеристика ових разних племена Рома јесте њихова пронаталистичка, ендогамна традиција, која је очигледно у прошлости помогла Ромима да преживе и оставе потомке, задржавајући посебност групе у исто време. Због тога, ситуација у којој се Роми данас налазе, а чије су карактеристике сегрегација и низак друштвено-економски положај, може да буде делом самоизазвана. Ово резултира из ромског традиционалног одбијања да прихвате, и постану део веће хијерархије њихових земаља-домаћина, у којима су рођачке везе и односи остали као веома важна ба-

за за сарадњу и реципроцитет, нарочито на Балкану, где много тога што пролази као етницитет на локалном нивоу у ствари представља сродство. Ако је ова хипотеза тачна, онда богатство, социоекономски положај и предвидљивост срединских и друштвених околности неће утицати на репродуктивну стратегију Рома.

Друга хипотеза:

Начин репродукције Рома није резултат утицаја њихове традиције већ је продукт сиромаштва, за које су карактеристични велики фертилитет, велика смртност одојчади, велики број ванбрачне деце, релативно велика стопа злочина, неписменост и зависност од социјалне помоћи. Најсиромашнији слој становништва, са великом стопом фертилитета, ослања се на државне програме социјалне и материјалне помоћи, који тако одржава новорођену децу изнад нивоа гладовања и умањује смртност истих. Шансе Рома да се успну на друштвеној лествици — у средњу класу, гледано по приходима и нивоу образовања — далеке су и не много вероватне, нарочито ако се има у виду да Роми скоро да и немају „средњу класу“ којој би тежили. Због тога, алтернатива је рађање великог броја деце, која су често, због социјалне помоћи/дечијег додатка, и једини сигурни приход на који Роми могу рачунати. Зашто онда немају више деце? Ако је ова поставка тачна, онда релативно имућнији Роми, којима није потребна социјална помоћ да би преживели, имају мање деце по породици него ромска популација уопште, и аналогно р и К теорији, улажу више у свако дете. Један начин улагања би био и школовање деце, како би она могла лакше да се интегришу у друштво, и сходно образовању и умећу, да нађу и боље плаћене послове.

Ове хипотезе су тестиране на српским Циганима — Гурбетима. Србија је недавно прошла кроз демографску транзицију, има релативно велику популацију Рома, и током комунистичког режима, њена влада се залагала за пронаталистичку — социјалну политику, која је можда одговорна за велику стопу фертилитета коју Роми имају и данас. Неколико нивоа података и анализа су употребљени да би се тестирала предвиђања обе хипотезе; као прво, теренски рад са две ромске групе у Мачви, поређења свих доступних података о демографији, специфични економски, културни и друштвени услови који су могли подстицати или не подстицати велики фертилитет и шаблон ендогамног брака код Рома.

На крају, на основу анализе доступних података, може се рећи да богатство, друштвени статус и предвидљивост средстава за живот не утиче битно на начин склапања брака и репродуктивну стратегију код анализираних група Рома.