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With Eyes Wide Shut. Job Searching Qualified Roma and Employee Seeking Companies

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Abstract

This article is dedicated to Julia Szalai who researches the underlying reasons, consequences and mechanisms of the social exclusion of the Roma in Central and East European societies. Her work and her writings serve as a compass for those who examine problems of social exclusion, including the authors of this article. The present paper discusses position of the Roma on the Hungarian job-market, focusing on highly-qualified young Roma within the context of the business sphere. Our knowledge is informed by the first results of an initiative which creates bridges between disadvantaged social groups and the business sector through pro-active measures. The initiative mobilizes multinational companies, business trainers, NGOs promoting social inclusion, and academics. Both the initiative and our study intend to pursue a subtle understanding of the tangible and hidden obstacles that highly educated young Roma encounter when seeking employment, and of the dilemmas that multinational companies face in relating to these prospective employees.

Keywords: Qualified Roma Youth, Trajectories of Exclusion, Business Recruitment Practices, Equality of Opportunities, Pro-active Employer Interventions.

1. Introduction

The literature on Roma employment which discusses the reasons and mechanisms of the exclusion of Roma from the job-market is vast and manifold (Kertesi 2005, Kertesi and Kézdi 2011, Szalai and Zentai 2014, Váradi 2014). Many have analysed the different types of state policies designed to promote the employment of the Roma, and the reasons why these have not been too successful (Adamecz et.al. 2013, Messing and Bereményi 2016, Molnár 2017). Very little has been said, however, about the employment chances of highly qualified Roma, and about the employment potential of the business sector in this regard. A few studies explore career paths of highly educated Roma. For example, Durst-Fejős-Nyírő (2016) analyze life-story interviews of college educated Roma women and their preferences regarding work and family, while Kende (2007) examines career paths and future expectations of Roma university students. There is hardly any literature, however, focusing on the role of the business sector in the employment of highly educated Roma. It is beyond doubt that a new generation of Roma has grown up who cannot be characterized by a low level of education: many have obtained baccalaureates (a secondary school leaving qualification), and some have higher education degrees or other qualifications which make them competitive in the business sector. Yet, even for such candidates forms of job-market inclusion beyond public sector employment, public work, and project-related work – i.e. jobs that may provide stable income and career opportunities – appear to be beyond reach, or are very difficult to obtain.

This article provides an understanding of the nature of the obstacles standing in the way of these highly qualified Roma, who formally fulfil all requirements of the job-market and have the required schooling and skills, yet still face difficulties in finding appropriate employment. This holds true despite the fact that the Hungarian job market currently suffers from severe workforce shortages. What are the reasons for the mismatch between the capacities of this specific group of job seekers and the needs of companies? This article relies on data obtained from the research component of a project[1] designed to support young and highly qualified Roma to find employment in the business sector relevant to their qualifications.

In the first part of the paper we introduce the conceptual frames of our inquiry, and then dive into theoretical approaches that guided our work. Following a description of the data, we present the results of an empirical research which focuses on the four distinct (though significantly intersecting) roots of the disadvantaged position of young educated Roma and the corresponding corporate responses to the employment interest of educated young Roma. We conclude our article by reflecting on our results through our initial theoretical lenses.

[1] The project which serves as the source of empirical data is entitled *Bridge to Business; Bridging Young Roma and Business: Intervention for inclusion of Roma youth through employment in the private sector in Bulgaria and Hungary*. The project is funded by the European Commission's DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and is being implemented in cooperation with Open Society Foundation Bulgaria, Autonómia Foundation, and the Central European University.

2. Conceptual Frame and Research Path

This study mobilizes insights from the social exclusion and inclusion literature, as well as from critical diversity studies. The former centers on social inequalities, social justice, and social mobility, whereas the latter seeks to uncover the dominant institutional paradigms and practices for managing diverse labor forces in the business sector. The former field has been widely discussed and enriched by scholarship pursued by Hungarian academia, in contrast to the latter field of studies. The authors of this paper do not represent exceptions to this state of affairs, having only started to learn about critical diversity studies. In acknowledgement of this uneven theoretical backing, our study mobilizes a dual conceptual lens to explore the opportunities, experiences and obstacles to employing members of minority groups, including the Roma, in multinational companies that operate in Central and East European localities and contexts. This dual perspective (social inclusion and diversity management in the business sector) provides the novelty of the article and may also contribute to bringing closer the seemingly worlds-apart business (micro) perspective and the social justice (macro) perspective. In the conclusions, we flesh out the main obstacles that highly qualified Roma face during their job-market integration in Hungary compared to those known from the social inclusion literature. Moreover, our conclusions move beyond the proposals related to practical diversity policy typically found in the business sphere.

Most of the literature about the social inclusion of Roma is discussed along the two major approaches that have emerged in wider political and policy thinking on equality and social justice in the last three decades: equal treatment, and equal opportunities. *Equal treatment* postulates that each citizen, irrespective of ethnic background, gender, age, etc., should receive the same treatment. This has become the defining approach in Hungary today, both in the state and the business sectors (Tardos 2011). Actors who follow this approach, however, may not realize that the disadvantages attached to minority groups do not disappear, because in a competitive situation such as job recruitment, individual characteristics originating from the disadvantaged group situation place the individual in an unfavorable position. The e*qual opportunity (positive action)* approach emerged from the recognition that equal treatment often reinforces existing inequalities, and individually centered interventions cannot compensate for or eradicate unequal chances in competitive situations. Therefore, individuals from disadvantaged social groups should be given special help and the playing ground should be levelled, paying special attention to entry points. It is acknowledged that positive action (often referred to as affirmative action) also has negative outcomes and weaknesses: this approach may correct the consequences of a disadvantaged situation or group position but it does not change the discriminative environment, or only does so partially (Tomei 2005, Heilmann 2004, Hodges-Aeberhard 1999). It does not transform wider societal practices and norms into inclusive ones. It may also generate or reinforce the stigmatization of the target group and its members, and induce resistance from the mainstream. This often results in old-new interethnic distance or conflict. Members of the majority society often perceive positive action as unfair and one that provides an undeserved advantage to minority individuals.

Critical diversity studies emerged as a distinctive inquiry in the mid-1990s. In broad terms, it investigates the discourses, practices, and consequences of the diversity management paradigm which started to influence and later to dominate labor management frames in the corporate world. The diversity management paradigm emerged in the 1980s in the US, and quickly spread in UK and European business contexts. It is argued that the rise of the paradigm stemmed from the failures of and discontent with the *equal treatment* and *equal opportunity* measures and regulations established in Western liberal democracies in the 1970s and 1980s. These measures were also embraced, even if not fully and unambiguously implemented, by multinational companies (Kirton and Greene 2016). Others propose that the emergence of the diversity management paradigm is a prime manifestation of neo-liberal economic and governance ideals and practices. Critical diversity studies have challenged the dominant rhetoric of diversity as a positive and empowering approach for valorizing employees' different capacities. These studies contest the instrumental view of differences inherent to the diversity paradigm and unveil how the conceptual shift from equality to diversity reflect and obscure existing unequal power relations within organizations (Zanoni et al 2010). Another related stream in the critical diversity studies literature investigates the entanglement of, or rather the split between, equality opportunity and diversity management principles from the wider perspective of inequality and fairness in terms of managing the labor force in business organizations (Tatli 2011). One may argue that critical diversity studies not only scrutinize the practical diversity management literature and its institutional outcomes but also ponder the wider issues that labor relations and critical labor studies also dwell on. Thus, of crucial concern for critical diversity inquiries and for the labor relations literature is the clash and compromise between business interest and social justice.

From among the most important recent trends in the literature, for our initiative and analysis the comprehensive accounts of the massive changes that occurred in business management discourses in the 1990s are truly instructive. Multinational companies seem to have engaged with diversity management principles enthusiastically, rather than reluctantly. Diversity management is characterized, most importantly, by a positive image and even celebratory rhetoric of *difference,* the grounds of which is often undefined, and a dominant reference to the rationale of business performance, a pronounced attention to the individual, and the voluntary transformation of the organization and its culture (Kirton and Greene 2016:127). Difference within the organization is understood as an asset which contributes to better performance and innovation. Companies that embrace diversity are theorized to be better able to attract skilled workers in an increasingly diverse labor market, reach out to diverse markets by making contact with a diverse set of customers, and improve organizational learning through exposing employees to a wider range of perspectives (Zanoni et al 2010:12). Critical diversity studies warn that the diversity paradigm may ignore deep structures of social discrimination, indirect forms of discrimination, and stubborn patterns of disadvantage. The very definition and distinction between sameness and difference continues to be defined by the dominant or power-holder group. Important differences within the social positions of groups may remain unacknowledged or downplayed, while minority groups may become

stigmatized and ghettoized, and their inferiority reasserted. The strategy of emphasizing differences is often blind to the wider societal environment, thus promoting, at best, the movement and interaction of the workforce within the organization, but doing little to removing intra-organizational barriers to employment. Legitimized by reference to business interests, at times of hardship or market competition, diversity concerns may easily be sidelined (Kirton and Greene 2016: 130-136).

In agreement with the above critical stance on the diversity management paradigm, our exploratory and simultaneously engaged approach also resonates with voices in the literature which argue that organizational actors do not simply deploy hegemonic discourses of diversity, but rather selectively appropriate them. They combine them with other available norms to make sense of diversity, their organization and their work, and to construct their own professional position on diversity (Zanoni et al., 2010:17). Tomlinson and Schwabenland (2010) reveal that the opposition between equal opportunities and diversity management is less clear cut than leading voices in the critical diversity literature often suggest (Tatli 2011). Others call for an examination of multi-layered mechanisms of diversity management to reveal the ambivalences and conceptual and practical tensions that exist in this field. Targeted empirical research on the position, dilemmas, and operation of diversity managers or HR officers may reveal more ambivalence about pure business performance-driven diversity and the potential for fostering practical change than the purely discursive analysis of high-level strategic statements (Zanoni et al., 2010). In sum, the drivers, scope, and nature of diversity business practices need to be analyzed in depth to grasp the potential and limitations of social justice and inclusion outcomes in business practices. To this end, our inquiry links the microcosms of workplace practices at multinational companies in Hungary with the wider social, political, and policy structures that shape the practices of labor market and wider social exclusion.

A relatively thin literature has emerged about the positions, inspirations, knowledge and actual interventions concerning equality and diversity in employment relations by corporate actors in the Hungarian economy. Selective reading indicates that one stream within this literature explores corporate social responsibility (CSRÖ developments in terms of their complex sets of objectives and contents. These studies mostly discuss accountability and sustainable development, and rarely the gender equality objectives embodied in CSR policies of the observed corporate actors. Another stream within the literature that is more directly relevant to our inquiry dwells on corporate thinking and action towards the inclusion of various disadvantaged groups, or specifically the Roma, whether or not this activity is driven by CSR visions. Mészáros and Várhalmi (2011) have found that the majority of corporate decision makers acknowledge the wider societal benefits of the labor market inclusion of the Roma and also promote the idea of targeted labor market efforts to that end. They, however, rarely feel inspired to actively become involved in those efforts. Most of them would not consider employing Roma, even in times of a dire labor shortage. When specifying the reasons for the lack of employment opportunities for the Roma, business leaders refer to the low level skills of the Roma and dominant social prejudices which would punish business actors who are more devoted to Roma

inclusion. Moreover, these leaders believe that improving the employment conditions for the Roma is most importantly the duty of the state.

Katalin Tardos, who has been investigating equal opportunity and diversity practices in the domestic corporate sector for several years, argues that modest development occurred in the early 2010s regarding the participation of corporate actors in addressing the low employment rate of vulnerable or protected groups in the Hungarian labor market (Tardos 2015). This development should be acknowledged, in spite of the fact that it is still a minority of actors who are engaged in targeted equal opportunity and diversity work. Based on original empirical research that embraced a large number of corporate actors and compared data gathered at two points in time (2010 and 2012), Tardos argues that compared to earlier initiatives that were triggered by anti-discrimination policies, legal regulations and European norm diffusion, company leaders report about different motivational forces, such as internal ethical convictions in the organization, and employers' satisfaction and loyalty (ibid: 190). The research also revealed that engaged actors became more conscious about the number and nature of groups that face disadvantages or who are vulnerable in terms of labor and wider social affairs. Although other target groups have received more pronounced attention, the visibility and significance of ethnic minorities has also increased. The most tangible progress was made among the large transnational companies and, interestingly, mid-size domestic companies (ibid: 191-193). The research concludes that for one-third of the corporate actors in the sample, equality and diversity principles are not yet connected with the strategic business goals of the organization; however, the awareness is on the rise on the salience of qualified and satisfied labor force at the companies' disposal (ibid: 198). A smaller group of companies, mostly larger ones and transnational enterprises, are creating innovative practices and are making their hiring and labor management policies and instruments more equality and diversity savvy.

Our active equality of opportunity project and the research embodied in it may obtain useful insights through its approach within wider critical diversity scholarship and its representatives in domestic settings. Our practical interventions and inquiry target business actors that are making a more conscious effort to engage with social diversity challenges, and are thus moving beyond the more fluid language of cross-cultural differences and encounters. We acknowledge, however, that the line between cross-cultural and diversity thinking is often blurred.

3. Methods

In our article, we rely on the first results of a pilot research[2] that aims at analyzing the impacts of targeted interventions to corporate hiring practices. We are conducting quantitative impact analysis as well as qualitative and anthropological methods. This article uses the results of the qualitative research, during which interviews were conducted with Roma participants of the project, and with HR personnel at multinational companies (MNCs) which participated in the program. In

[2] The article relies on impact analysis interviews conducted within the scope of the *Bridges to Business* project.

total, 12 interviews conducted with young Roma between March–May, 2017 were used in the analysis. The interviews were scheduled at the end of a four-day training program, or later, shortly after the training. Half of the interviewees were men, all of the interviewees had obtained at least a baccalaureate, and four of them had a higher education diploma too. In terms of regional representation, participants from eastern Hungary, southern Hungary (Baranya County) and from the capital city were included in equal proportions. From the above description it is obvious that our interviewees hardly represent the Roma youth in Hungary: they are highly qualified compared to the majority of this segment of the population, therefore some of their work-related experiences may be different from the average, or rather specific. However, their stories shed light on the social selection mechanisms which Hungarian youth of Roma ethnic background face during their daily experiences.

Another part of the qualitative data was obtained through interviews with six HR representatives; typically the HR personnel responsible for diversity and equal treatment at the partner MNCs. The same statement can be made about these organizations as about the Roma interviewees: they hardly represent the totality of the world of business companies in Hungary, as their participation in a Roma employment program indicates their above-average awareness and commitment to company diversity and inclusion. We also used our field observations and information obtained during our participation on the training sessions of the program.

During the interviews with partner-company representatives, we tried to map the company approaches to diversity. Due to the relatively short time since the program was launched and the time of our interviews, in addition to the lack of hired Roma employees, the interviewed company representatives (mostly working for HR departments) spoke about their impressions with Roma applicants in general, and not about participants of the specific program, which we were following. The same applies to the interviews with Roma participants who spoke about their employment and job-seeking experiences with companies in general, not with the partner companies.

4. Results

In our analysis, we identify factors that contribute to the disadvantages that prevent even a group of relatively well-positioned members of the Roma community from applying for open company positions. The analysis is based on four key background factors shaping individual trajectories. We first introduce the experiences of the Roma youth after which we examine how the HR representatives of companies perceive and react to these experiences.

4.1 Family Background

Through the sociological portraits of our young Roma interviewees, it can be stated that many of them are first-generation baccalaureate or diploma holders who have recently broken out of situation of poverty and social segregation. Their experience with mainstream society through elementary, secondary, and in some cases university years had a major impact on their lives. Our Roma interviewees need to rely on their own resources and find their own solutions in social situations related to their

integration. Due to the lack of a middle-class family model, there are no readily available schemes or cognitive frames to guide them. These resources cannot be substituted by a highly supportive family background and firm emotional support from home that many of our interviewees told about. Moreover, at a later stage and during a successful period of adjustment (e.g. when living in Budapest or attending university in a city), many of our interviewees reported that they found it difficult to relate to their sending environment and their families back home due to the huge gap between the two worlds: the rural Roma family with very little schooling experience, and an integrated, new life in a big city (see also Durst in this journal issue).

Our interviews indicate that while it is common for the family to foster the mobility of their children (i.e. support them to advance in different ways) at a young age, at a later stage they expect them to follow their decisions and, if necessary, return home, find employment nearby, and remain in daily contact. This expectation often comes from the simple fact that the parents need financial and social support from their grown-up child. Respondent 'Cs', for instance, became well integrated in the capital city and started working at an international organization as an intern. He had a good time, enjoyed the multicultural character of the city, and made lots of new friends. However, he had the feeling that the distance between him and his mother and grandmother – the two people who raised him and who systematically supported him to become who he is now (an educated man with two diplomas, fluent in English) – was growing. He felt guilty leaving them behind, and after the end of his internship year decided to move back to his village in eastern Hungary. It is likely that he will not be able to find a job locally which would measure up to his qualifications and career ambitions.

As suggested earlier, the parents of our interviewees had almost without exception very low level qualifications (only elementary school or basic vocational training). This implies that although family background and parental influence is important, it is not fully defining in terms of schooling career and further professional advancement. Despite receiving full support for their further studies from their closer environment, our interviewees suffered many disadvantages, for instance, in financial terms. Their families, in contrast to the families of their middle-class peers, were unable to compensate for the deficiencies of the public education system (such as weak foreign language training and IT education) or compensate for these weaknesses through paying for extra tuition. As a consequence, the young Roma end up in a disadvantaged position compared to their middle-class peers in certain areas highly valued by the corporate job-market, such as the aforementioned foreign languages and IT skills.

Many of our interviewees spoke about a kind of "commuting" between two worlds or two social realities: due to their studies or work, they often need to switch between the context of home and the context of a large-city middle-class world within a relatively short time. In other words, they do not move along a single, upward mobility track, but instead we see life stories as a series of back-and-forth steps, where geographical mobility (moving from small settlement to a town, from a countryside township to the capital city, and then from the center back home to the sending environment) go together with changing income levels and different levels of mobility. These two contexts (a middle-class, urban environment, and peripheral, rural Roma

settlements) stand worlds apart from each other: "commuting" of this sort is very tiring and often expensive, not just in financial terms but often from an emotional-psychological perspective too. We see at least three distinct strategies for coping with the related difficulties, and these may change within the lifetime of the same individual: (1) continuous switches, constant "translation" between the two worlds (not necessarily in terms of language use, but regarding behavior, habits, and information), which is quite demanding for the individual concerned; in addition, the environment is not supportive of such switches, (2) detachment from the sending environment and adjustment to the new one. During this type of a process, the young Roma person leaves his/her family environment and becomes engrossed in the new environment characterized by middle-class, urban culture and values. In our research this means that they become adopted to the new company environment and the norms associated with it, while the "left behind" context rapidly loses its relevance, and (3) the young Roma person stays in (or returns to) their home-environment and becomes an over-qualified unemployed person, or an underpaid, exploited public worker. We saw several examples of the latter. For instance, Cs., after completing an English-language graduate program, moved back to his tiny village from the capital city. Respondent Z works as a social worker within a public work program in a secondary school dorm due to the lack of any alternatives in his hometown. It is clear from the above that such 'solutions' require significant resources, while they also result in the development of useful *skills* that are required by most of the MNCs: cultural and linguistic adjustment, tolerance, openness, flexibility, the ability to switch between different worlds, and "translation" abilities, along with good communication skills.

The company responses to disadvantages related to the young Roma candidates' family background and to the skills they possess can be best described as a blind spot. Most of the companies we talked to emphasized the principle of equal treatment, and did not see that it is exactly this attitude which excludes the Roma youth from the selection process. With the exception of physically challenged applicants, the employment of whom generates explicit financial benefits for the company[3], we did not encounter any pro-active measures considering Roma, or other minority candidates, with more care and attention during the recruitment and selection procedure. When companies select their future employees they do not have the attention or allow sufficient time to deal with special circumstances such as the family background of their candidates. As HR representatives of the companies explained, they do not have the required human resources during the interview pre-selection process to consider such details. Furthermore, it is also the lack of awareness and limited nature of selection methods (i.e. use of corresponding HR tools) which leads to unexplored potentials of the applicant, in addition to the explicit performance and documented qualifications. Such potential and opportunities could be easily brought to the surface and turned into successful recruiting practices with relatively small investment through initiatives such as mentoring, thereby multiplying the initial investment. Companies do not recognize and appreciate the extraordinary investment that Roma youth from small rural settlements have made by the time they have

[3] This is due to the Act on Rehabilitation Tax 2011/CXCI, enabling companies employing more than 5 per cent physically challenged persons within their workforce to save on rehabilitation tax. This latter was approx. 1 million HUF/person/year) in 2017.

reached the baccalaureate level, often having achieved their goals through significant effort, self-discipline, and persistence. Understanding this could serve as important information when assessing the hidden reserves of a potential employee. Characteristics such as perseverance, ambition, self-discipline, communication, intercultural communication skills, and motivation could be valued at an MNC if recognized during the selection process. However, if selection takes place exclusively on meritocratic grounds and is based on performance in entry test, such qualities may stay hidden. We only met one HR representative who during the selection process claimed to consider the social background and hidden potential of the candidates belonging to minority groups.

On the other hand, we encountered a company which recognized the 'otherness' of the young Roma candidates and interpreted it in a negative way, reducing their chances during the hiring process. A representative explained about the Roma candidates as follows: "*...perhaps because he comes from another culture, promises that he will call back and he doesn't...it's a different value system, or I don't know what to call it...they are not socialized into this job-market competition, into this etiquette, how to behave...*" The HR person we interviewed referred to the norm that if an applicant accepts a different job from the one they are interviewing for, they are generally expected to call back to tell the first potential employee. It is obvious that the Roma are not the only ones who sometimes skip this step, but in their case this small mistake may easily become *culturalized* – the inaction gets interpreted as a sign of the Roma's 'cultural otherness' – a negative group characteristic, a negative stereotype (i.e. 'the Roma' don't know how to communicate 'properly'). The same HR person wondered about Roma employees in the following way: "*somehow they don't behave the same way as other candidates, this is also a serious problem, they have nothing to build upon*". A tangible ambivalence characterizes the HR representatives involved in the selection processes: on the one hand, they sense social differences, but they don't know how to handle those. They do not wish to (or cannot) invest additional energy into handling this issue, which is not necessarily a result of prejudiced thinking but often stems from lack of time, capacity, or sufficient skills and sensitivities.

4.2 School Experiences

First, we should establish the fact that the schooling of the Roma youth who participated in our research is significantly different from the experience of the majority of Roma in Hungary. All of the former have at least a baccalaureate, while some of them have also obtained a university diploma or were enrolled in tertiary education during the time of the research. Thus, they represent the elite of the Roma youth, at least from the point of view of schooling success. We identified three characteristics during the interviews which were mentioned by all of this cohort, and which, we believe, are preconditions for a Roma child to reach the baccalaureate level of education. One of these conditions is a strong and supportive family background, where learning is an obvious norm and is valued. The parents of all our young respondents supported and encouraged them to study. "*I was always told by my parents that I needed to prove myself at the maximum level". "My dad told me: 'son, I have a vocation [a vocational job], you go and achieve more!'". "My parents saw the*

key to a better life is in further studies. They didn't want me to live in such difficult conditions [doing temporary, physical work] as they do".

The second element of schooling success, mentioned by almost all our interviewees, was a mentor-teacher relationship. This did not necessarily involve a formal mentor, but often a teacher who supported them from early on. One interviewee was helped by her kindergarten teacher, and thereby avoided being placed in the segregated Roma class 'for children with special needs' which was otherwise the default option for Roma kids. "*Only Roma kids went to the special class (kisegitő). The classrooms were in the basement ... I didn't end up in this class, I was lucky ... One of the teachers liked me in the kindergarten ... it was not even considered that I would be sent to the special class, because according to this teacher I was so smart and clever. And there I was lucky, I got a 'fairy-teacher' too."* These teachers not only paved the way for the Roma children through education, but often provided emotional support and acted as role-models. *"They continuously paid attention to me and dealt with my little soul to keep up my interest in studies, my motivation, my ability to study further"*– recalled one of our interviewees about her teachers.

The third characteristic common to the program participants is that none of them attended an ethnically segregated school or class. In some cases, they were the only Roma in their class. Nonetheless, an integrated school environment often results in conflict, especially in schools frequented by the children of the local elite. Such 'elite' town schools may support mobility for the talented children of the lower-middle classes, but it is also in these schools that ethnic discrimination appears in its sharpest forms. Many reported that one or more teachers treated them unfairly, and discriminated against them. The interviewees often spoke about their compulsion to achieve, and the need to refute negative stereotypes. "*I was warned by my parents in Class 8 that if I moved out of my village I would have to perform twice as was well as a Hungarian.*" Discrimination by teachers, which kids often call being 'picked on' (*pikkelés*), was not necessarily understood in an ethnic dimension; however, it sometimes left deep traces in the affected young person's psyche, and could irreparably affect their schooling career. Often the respondents felt that it was their Roma identity which was an eyesore to the teacher. *"My parents enrolled me into the town school, where I was the only Roma. (...) Three teachers' kids, the mayor's kid and the headmaster's son also studied in this class, they always made me feel that I was 'only' a Roma...there was a teacher who constantly nagged me, but he taught me that if someone sits in front of me saying 'hey stinking Gypsy!', I will not be much impressed."* Favoritism, discrimination and negative comments about the Roma left deep wounds: this elementary teacher ruined the respondent's self-esteem. The discriminating and derogatory behavior of the teacher and the fact that our interviewee was left out of class events such as the end-of-year performance became a psychological barrier for him, ruining not just his school performance but affecting his social behavior, even until the time of the interview. In particular, situations that require a high level of performance such as tests or interviews provoke neurotic symptoms. The respondent finally stayed at the school and later moved on to a gymnasium (a traditional high school) and to university because his talent was recognized by other teachers who supported him.

To sum up, we claim that while it is the urban 'elite' schools which represent channels of mobility for socially disadvantaged Roma children, studying at these institutions may come at a huge price: discrimination, frequent feelings of being 'different' and being made to feel 'different', loneliness in this position, and sometimes psychological trauma connected to all the previous burdens. This results in ruined self-esteem and confidence. Many of our respondents chose a strategy of fighting such disadvantages by openly subscribing to their ethnic identity and thus putting up a kind of a fence to prevent further attacks. But even such young people had to work hard on resolving the traumas they had experienced during childhood.

Even though the project targets young Roma with baccalaureates or tertiary qualifications, HR personnel from the participating companies referred to the low level of education of the Roma as job-seekers as a general trait when asked about their disadvantages. Beyond this, they could not identify other disadvantages. Meanwhile, all of the participating companies recognized the lack of self-confidence of many Roma applicants, but usually considered it an independent characteristic unlinked to being a member of a racialized ethnic minority (i.e. they considered it to be a form of shyness). Even if they suspect that applicants experience discrimination during childhood, they do not dwell on it. Companies do not feel that it is within their remit to compensate for such disadvantages, and this approach means they apply the principle of equal treatment without being conscious of their applicants' lack of equal opportunities. A company HR head, for instance, treated low self-esteem as a cultural trait. We saw one exception to this general pattern: an HR representative of an MNC 'saw through' the lack of self-confidence of these young Roma and tried to support freshly hired Roma employees by introducing them to colleagues and personally helping them to take the first difficult steps in their new workplaces. Nevertheless, such forms of support are available only to those who have already been through a color-blind selection process.

Meanwhile, an HR representative of another MNC interpreted the strategy of a young Roma intern who presented himself in a self-confident manner as being over-ambitious or pushy: "*It came across as something bizarre that someone would come in with such ambition that he wanted to move up the ladder fast, but at a big company such as ours, one has to wait patiently in the queue. This is nothing ethnic, not just about Roma, it applies to everyone."* However, taking a closer look at this story it is clear that this high-level ambition was translated into 'pushiness' in the case of the Roma intern, while in general such ambitions are inherently part of meritocratic company culture.

Another disadvantage stemming from Roma youth's schooling that frequently occurred compared to the stable educational experiences of the middle-class children is frequent changes of schools. Such instances are not identified by the companies as a consequence of discriminatory school practices, or abusive teachers. Also, Roma youth often relate to authority with suspicion due to their negative schooling experiences and frequent experience of being humiliated: "*a good boss is one who is somewhere else*", summed up one of the training participants. During a job interview, interviewers may recognize only some part of this phenomenon; namely, that the young Roma do not place themselves in the position of partners but instead behave in

a defensive, reserved way; they cannot present their skills and abilities in the expected way, or on the contrary, they overrate themselves.

All the company representatives emphasized that equal treatment is their primary consideration; they do not distinguish between candidates based on skin color, ethnicity or other personal traits. This also meant at most companies that ethnic identity remained taboo, according to a badly-defined notion of political correctness. Very few of them perceived that it is exactly equal treatment which places Roma candidates – after being humiliated at school and experiencing discrimination, so struggling with low self-esteem – in a disadvantaged position. These individuals are filtered out by the corporate recruitment system first because it does not look into the history of each candidate and interview situation. The much-emphasized equal treatment approach is responsible for reproducing the disadvantaged situation of Roma candidates: they could not compensate for an insufficient school education through private tuition, could not afford private foreign language classes, did not have a PC at home due to the weak economic status of their families. Most of the HR representatives we interviewed were not interested in the reasons for weaker IT skills or poorer foreign-language skills; they only emphasized their strict meritocratic principles and anti-discrimination measures, with the exception of one company. This company was willing to consider a slightly weaker Roma candidate (weaker than some non-Roma candidates) and to recognize other personality traits and skills deemed valuable to the company. They were also willing to help to build the qualities they perceived as lacking through an in-house training process which took place after the Roma in question was hired.

4.3 Geographical Distance, Segregated Living

Segregation is addressed by the sociological literature as an ethno-social process; the lack of infrastructure and adequate public transport contributes to geographic marginalization. The latter usually results in serious mobility challenges and disadvantages in relation to employment. In terms of the choice of employment, the precarity of Roma on the job market is obvious, and is caused by the intersecting influences of geographical distance, economic marginalization and discrimination. A significant literature tells about the processes through which Roma have been pushed into deindustrialized and economically marginalized areas in Hungary in which mines and heavy industry shut down in the 1990s and workplaces are no longer available, while public services, including public transport, have diminished to the utmost minimum (for more on this, Váradi and Virág 2015; Nagy et al., 2015; Szalai and Zentai 2014; Kertesi 2005)

Interviews revealed that young Roma have to cope with the consequences of living in remote settlements, far from larger urban areas where employment is available. Even highly qualified Roma find it difficult to bridge the distance between their homes and potential workplaces. For Roma with a baccalaureate or sometimes diploma from higher education, three main options are available: stay in their locality and join a public work program (which means being underpaid and lacking job mobility), obtain employment in temporary and part-time jobs, typically in social development projects, or move to a larger city, leaving behind their relatives and

families, often in poor economic and physical health and in significant need of support. Such Roma are often forced to accept jobs which are far below their qualifications as they do not have the financial means to support their geographical mobility (e.g. to move to a larger city and rent an apartment/ room, involving significant financial capital) either individually, or within the extended family. Our interviewees often chose to stay in their communities and accept less skilled jobs such as cleaning, public work, or day work in the agricultural or construction sector. Obviously, the non-Roma living in economically disadvantaged, geographically segregated areas are equally hit by these disadvantages, but the majority of Hungarian Roma live in such areas of the country. Furthermore, we identify a strong tendency to negative self-selection: young Roma do not even consider taking jobs a bit further away from their localities, presuming that they will not be able to commute or move to another settlement if this is required by the new job. This is due to the lack of any external support, a precise assessment of opportunities, and not least, a lack of opportunities.

The issue of geographical distance turns out to be even more complex than a mere lack of economic capital. Apart from the financial and geographic difficulties described above, large cities, where there is a greater choice of jobs, Budapest specifically, turn out to be unknown social and cultural terrain for many of the Roma respondents. A lack of cultural capital and a lack of skills which would help them to navigate the urban space of Budapest is evident in case of our Roma interviewees. In addition, the visible signs of being a Roma (appearance, skin color, dress, dialect or language use) evokes negative stereotypes, judgment and rejection in some social situations, which renders the new start in the city even more difficult. It is obviously very challenging for some to leave behind the protective community of a small village and become accommodated to a vibrant urban life. The depth of these challenges is shown by the stories of some of our interviewees: several of them decided to move back to their villages, often into a shared household with their parents, from where any further moves to a bigger city are as difficult as they were originally.

As is well-known, the job market is very much network-driven in Hungary: personal contacts are essential for finding out about job openings, as well as successfully applying for these. Due to the fact that employers typically belong to the upper-middle class and were socialized in the gymnasiums and universities of Budapest and of some larger cities, rural Roma, especially if they were educated in segregated settings, have very limited access to these social networks. Our interviewees were well-qualified Roma, but many could only find jobs through ethnic networks (Roma Advanced Colleges, Roma scholarships, etc.) that serve as the core of their weak ties (Granovetter 1973). However, these jobs usually reinforce a state of dependency because most of them are project based, temporary, and exposed to politics. Some of the MNCs we interviewed partly recognize the challenges their Roma applicants experience in relation to geographical distance and have tried to find solutions to such difficulties. However, we should stress that those were rare instances. For instance, one HR representative who supported a young Roma arranged, with the support of the management of the company, for the successful applicant to receive temporary accommodation from the company until she made her home in the city. Such arrangements are not only framed at the individual level (we met with only one

such case), but even when they exist do not become systemic responses to such problems.

At most companies, financial support for commuting is the only benefit which is available. For those living in localities with poor transportation infrastructure (public transport) or at a significant distance from the workplace, this support may not be forthcoming. In other cases, and at other companies, such benefits are awarded on the basis of individual applications which means they cannot be considered systematic responses to a systemic disadvantage. Many of the companies we interviewed referred to the relocation support program advertised by the state (the Youth Guarantee Program, or benefits accessible through the 'Job-market Centers' run by the state), but we could not identify any company-level support for helping the employees concerned to access such benefits. Moreover, such benefits are almost without exception awarded under strict conditions (e.g. only the registered unemployed or those who belong to defined demographic groups can apply for them).

We found that instead of supporting the geographical mobility of employees, companies try to benefit from tapping into unexploited groups of employees by establishing new centers in the countryside, mostly in regions where no or only a few MNCs previously existed. This process, in our understanding, will be further accelerated by the present lack of qualified workforce and other negative circumstances (poor infrastructure, expensive travel and expensive rental) in the capital city which tend to tie potential employees to their place of origin.

4.4 Discrimination in Employment

Many of our interviewees gave accounts of work-related discrimination that they had experienced prior to the project in their role as apprentices, during job applications and in job interviews mainly for blue-collar jobs, but the most critical time in terms of unequal treatment was during selection procedures. One of our interviewees recounted the following story which had occurred during his apprenticeship. "*I had been telling the shop manager that I was ill and was formally on sick leave, and that I would work the hours that I had missed due to my illness, but he said no* [to confirming this work as an apprentice]*. He was like that* [having a negative attitude] *explicitly, and only with me: I was the only Roma boy among the apprentices.*" In the end this respondent did not receive the related qualification because the signature of the shop manager proving that he had completed the apprenticeship, which is a condition for receiving this form of secondary school completion certificate, was lacking.

Roma who present explicit signs of their ethnicity are often rejected at the very start of the selection process even if they have the required qualifications. The career-path of A. illustrates such experiences: after continuing her education beyond obtaining a secondary school leaving qualification and acquiring additional professional qualifications she started looking for a job with, as she believed, very good chances in her local area, a small town in the south of Hungary. Despite the lack of a well-qualified workforce in the area, she was not hired and had to take on public work because – according to local norms – the most a Roma can do is this. Finally, she decided to move to Budapest in the hope of better employment where she also

experienced discriminative attitudes on several occasions while looking for a job. "*I went to work for a trial day, but when they saw that I was a Gypsy – ... you know it is written all over the faces of people in Budapest – they told me that the position was already filled*". No matter that she had good qualifications; she could only find a cleaning job because of her skin color and lack of network. Our last example highlights how widespread the racial discrimination of Roma is during the selection procedure. R., who has a tertiary-level education in finance and accounting, estimated that from ten job interviews he was asked about his ethnicity in six. His response was then followed by discriminative comments: "*I had a job interview in which they asked me "and by the way, are you Roma?" There was an employer who started telling me that the entire office is equipped with cameras and it is not possible to steal from the office*". This respondent moved to England, where he found a job in a very short time and nobody – neither security guards, people on buses nor employers – harassed him (a situations that occurred regularly in Hungary). For personal reasons he moved back to Hungary and is still looking for a job. We could continue listing examples of discrimination at length, but for now it is sufficient to establish the fact that being a 'visible' Roma reduces the chance of getting a job, even with good educational qualifications. Many young Roma become frustrated and traumatized as a consequence and give up looking for jobs that match their educational status. Those who find jobs were most likely to do so through their ethnic networks: through EU-funded inclusion (integration) projects, through Roma scholarships or support programs or minority politics, even if they would have preferred to break out from this limited network of ethnic employment.

Our interviews with multinational firms suggest that employers are rarely aware of the damage that experiences of discrimination may cause concerning the self-esteem and identity of young Roma. Even if they suspect such history, they are likely to disregard this context and think they have no bearing on it. The following quote summarizes well the typical approach and the lack of awareness about the disadvantages Roma job seekers have as a result of former experiences of discrimination: "*we do not have presumptions, we value all applicants based on their skills*". Although some of the HR people in charge of the equal opportunity strategies at firms tried to support program participants (but not those Roma who had arrived at the organizations in other ways), such support was aimed at individuals and ad hoc, rarely systematic. Most emphasized that their firm applied rigorous anti-discrimination policy. However, during the job interviews it turned out that even though our interviewees were involved in the selection process, none of them had real insight into the final selection decisions because these are made by a very small group of people (usually two or three). As equal opportunity rapporteurs they had haphazard insight into the job interviews and admitted that very often personal feelings played a role in the final steps of the selection procedure, "*even if someone gets as far as the final job interview, there needs to be a lot more happening until they get an offer: for example, it is important that "the chemistry works*" [between the applicant and their future boss].

Non-discrimination in recruitment often does not go beyond the drafting of formal documents and procedures: all of the companies we investigated have formal legal documents that are aligned with the equal opportunity act (2003/CXXV).

Complaints concerning the violation of these regulations involve formal procedures within these firms. In the course of the selection procedure, however, applicants are not aware of these internal policy documents. Procedures may address any complaints ex-post, but measures that aim at the prevention of unequal treatment are rare. Only at one of the firms did an HR representative mention that racial discrimination at the very first step of recruitment could be avoided by applying a practice common in other countries: namely, applicants' CVs should not include their pictures.

It is uncommon for companies to recognize (or disclose) the potential presence of prejudice or discrimination. They regard these phenomena rather as something that is characteristic of the external world. The following quote that contains the response of an HR representative to our question about what a Roma employee could do if they experience explicitly racialized comments at work clearly illustrates a lack of strategic thinking: "*they can handle it on their own, using professional or personal authority, or they may look for allies among employees. Finally, as a last resort they can escalate the case to their superior [...] or turn to the board of ethics with a complaint.*" A former program participant who had found a job at one of the partner companies had a bizarre experience on her first day of employment. Her boss called her in for a closed-door discussion during which he warned her that it sometimes happens that colleagues make inappropriate, even racist remarks about clients, but it is not worth taking these seriously; he argued that the comments involve only labels that are used in everyday communication but which are of no real significance.

We came across only a few instances when company HR recognized that discrimination may exist in a latent form within their firms. One of them – a company which employed some Roma but more importantly served a large number of Roma clients – recognized that prejudice and discrimination existed within the firm, and even towards clients. The organization did not stop at using the formal solutions described above but organized innovative forms of training for mid-level leaders to reveal and treat conflicts stemming from racial prejudice. Another multinational company that is characterized by a large level of diversity in all respects considered it important that it informed and educated its mid-level leaders and supported new employees from disadvantaged groups by forming mentor networks.

In sum, the quality of corporate responses to discrimination can be assessed on a wide scale. At the one end, there exist those companies which downplay or completely deny the possibility of racial discrimination on their terrain. Such companies do not go beyond meeting the formal requirements of setting up equal treatment regulations, and these documents and procedures are not or only rarely used. In the middle of this scale, we find companies which recognize the possibility of discrimination (and sometimes even its actual existence) and try to change such attitudes by organizing internal training events for employees. At the other end of the scale, we find those companies which not only acknowledge the presence of discrimination, but try to prevent it in the course of recruitment and during further phases of employment; they speak about ethnicity and race openly, and support community and self-representation.

5. Conclusions

In the introduction to this paper, we promised to try to reconcile two seemingly distinct approaches concerning the employment of educated young Roma. At first glance, the approaches of social justice and business management are contradictory, as the former looks into how socially disadvantaged individuals or communities may be supported to increase their social inclusion, while the latter is interested in how the performance and financial profitability of business organizations may be increased. Concerning the disadvantages discussed in this paper, we would like to show that these two approaches are not exclusive and may even support and strengthen one another in several respects.

The life stories of educated young Roma demonstrate that the majority of them have a disadvantaged background. Almost all of them experienced unfavorable educational environments and various obstacles to pursuing their educational careers. Thus, young Roma who manage to finish secondary education (with a baccalaureate) have made extraordinary efforts compared to their peers from middle-class families. Disadvantages are not only composed of the socio-economic conditions of their families, but of the prejudice and discrimination through which the wider social environment relates to them. It is obvious that even those Roma youngsters who overcome the challenges of weak financial, cultural, and network capital, travel distance, and discriminatory treatment by teachers and peers accumulate disadvantages. They may have fragile self-confidence and low self-esteem, and are frequently embarrassed when communicating within hierarchical relations. They also suffer from a lack of sound knowledge of foreign languages and IT skills. However, these young people have well-developed skills, knowledge, and capacities that can become valuable resources for various employers, such as persistence, resilience, conflict resistance, a drive for cooperation, loyalty, and most importantly, a high level of motivation. It is a pressing problem that their disadvantages are already salient at the first stages of the recruitment process, while their potential only becomes visible over time. Therefore, pro-active employer interventions are required to offset such disadvantages.

The approach of equal treatment that is widely applied by corporate actors in Hungary is not suitable for addressing such accumulated disadvantages. The result is that young Roma often do not get shortlisted for jobs, even if they meet formal educational prerequisites. In contrast, the principle of equal opportunity (or in this case, equal access) mobilizes differential forms of treatment and positive action to compensate for these disadvantages. Positive action requires additional attention and resources in the process of workforce recruitment and selection, seemingly undermining merit-based human resource management routines. However, positive action may facilitate the employment of a competent and productive labor force in the longer term. It is essential to highlight the significance of the time horizon. Hiring young Roma may create a less obviously capable labor force at the entry point, but positive intervention may create benefits even in the medium term. Acknowledging the *time lag* between the interventions made in the present and future benefits is a key challenge that we are addressing with the corporate actors in this bridging experiment.

Notwithstanding, timing is not the only challenging element of positive action. Various unintended consequences of positive action (such as the resistance of the organizational environment, possible stigmatization of the target group, or the weakening of performance in the case of premature withdrawal of specific support initiatives for the integration of disadvantaged groups) should be addressed by equality and diversity management knowledge, procedures, and institutional practices. These become timely following the act of recruitment. Our intervention and research addresses the gap in the labor force recruitment process, but we wish to obtain at least exploratory insights about the post-recruitment features of equal opportunity action at the selected companies.

In the current economic circumstances, one cannot ignore the potential effects of the labor shortage as regards particular components of the labor force in the Hungarian economy. Our research will observe employers' reactions to this new trend in the business environment, and the subsequent opportunities for linking the inclusion of educated young Roma to white-collar jobs in the corporate sector. Interestingly, in the wider global business realm, the literature is describing a shift or partial shift from equal opportunity to diversity policies, whereas in Hungarian (and perhaps in the CEE) context, a hybrid trend appears to be emerging: progress towards equal opportunity and diversity are not set up against one other. This progress is often, but not exclusively, unfolding under the umbrella of somewhat fluid CSR objectives and narratives. CSR activities in domestic settings appear to support ethical institutional and business operations for the purpose of achieving reputational outcomes, but are often practiced as pure charity. Our experiences show that such 'benevolence' often pertains towards Roma inclusion. The current interventions we are pursuing strive to explore the opportunities for explicit equal opportunity action in organizational processes which benefit specified target groups, the general labor force in the company, and also enhance business performance in the long run. The field open to this sort of interventions does not look empty any more, but not yet particularly cultivated.

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