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Making a difference without creating a difference: super-diversity as a new direction for research on Roma minorities

Annabel Tremlett

Abstract:

Academic and policy discourses recognise the diversity of Roma minorities, frequently using the word 'Roma' as an umbrella term that is meant to capture the inherent plurality of such populations. However, 'heterogeneity' can still prove to be an inadequate approach to diversity, as it categorises people and still positions them on an essentialising template of what it is to be 'Roma', which can discount their linguistic, cultural, socio-economic and identification hybridities, or 'super-diversity'. 'Super-diversity' is a relatively new concept that is seen as a way to better represent the types of diversities that are normal amongst contemporary populations. This article looks at the trajectory of research on Roma minorities and examines the opportunities and challenges for using super-diversity as a way of articulating a new direction.

Introduction

Debates on the nature of diversity and Roma minorities revolve around the question 'who is a Gypsy?' which has 'generated heated debates for decades' (Kállai, 2002: 8)¹. Academics argue over what is the basis for Roma identity – is it possible to see Roma people as 'one people' with similar histories and identities? Or does this detract from their particular cultures, or languages? Or is poverty actually the most defining characteristic? These debates have been divisive amongst academics working on themes relating to Roma minorities, with academics retreating to various 'camps' leaving a contentious, confusing arena for new researchers to negotiate (see Mayall, 2004, discussed later).

In this article I argue that these debates, whilst appearing to be arguing different positions, actually end up in a similar ideological place. The debates become

¹ The question itself denotes outside ascription, and points to a wider problem about the lack of self-representations of Roma people in academic work (Tremlett 2013). This article does not attempt to rectify this lack of representation, but in the parameters of this article, the focus is on current academic debates on Roma identity, with a view of building a more coherent approach to notions of diversity and ethnicity in such academic work.

centred on asking what the most important feature is that makes up Roma people's characters and experiences of their lives. Diversity becomes thus centred on looking at different types of poverty, or language, or culture – a heterogeneous approach to diversity that still keeps the notion of an overall 'group'. Such debates claim to be on opposing sides, while, in fact, all the debates revolve around the same question: 'so, who is a Gypsy?' leaving little room for understanding the everyday complexities of people's lives.

For both academics and policymakers, the problem of over-focusing on ethnic or other categories for analysis misses out on the inclusion of a range of other types of diversities, for example: gender, socio-economic positioning (or class contexts), generation, sexuality, legal status, local and national contexts, along with employment, education and migration experiences. Glossing over such differences can prevent a full understanding of social processes, change and the involvement of actors and their agencies. In practical terms this can narrow the scope for integration strategies. Furthermore, alluding to 'Roma' as a unique group with particular integration issues can prevent dialogues with other groups facing exclusion and discrimination, giving substance to the criticism that Romani studies still remains in 'splendid isolation' from other academic and policy debates (Willems, 1997: 305). This article explores the limits of seeing diversity only in terms of bounded groups, and offers a potential direction through recent discussions on 'super-diversity'.

'Super-diversity', a term coined by Vertovec, is seen as a means to conceptualise a post-multicultural era, looking 'beyond ethnicity' to recognise the importance of other 'additional variables' including different countries of origin, ethnicities, differential immigration status, entitlements or restrictions of rights, divergent labour market experiences, discrete gender and age profiles, spatial distribution patterns, and mixed local responses (Vertovec, 2007: 1025). This determined shift away from multiculturalist discourses and towards a focus on hybrid group dynamics differentiates super-diversity from other group-sensitive approaches

such as inter-sectionality that may still hold onto the idea of bounded groups². At the heart of super-diversity is the concern that previous multiculturalist perspectives focused primarily on ethnic groups which were inadequate in capturing the 'new patterns' of ways people are living (Vertovec, 2007, 2010). 'Simple ethnicity-focused approaches' are said to be inadequate and are often inappropriate for understanding individual needs or the 'dynamics of inclusion or exclusion' (2007: 1039). The contribution of 'super-diversity' is its potential to engage more deeply with the diverse life experiences and structural positionings of people. 'Rarely are these factors described side by side', writes Vertovec, 'the interplay of these factors is what is meant here, in summary fashion, by the notion of 'super-diversity' (2007: 1025).

If we take European institutional data on Roma populations it is easy to see how applicable 'super-diversity' is to these populations as they fall into a myriad of 'additional variables'. The very broad sketch below uses some of the categories Vertovec suggests as 'additional variables' as an example, and quickly reveals how *intra*-ethnic group differences can be as, or more, dramatic than *inter*-ethnic group comparisons, questioning the boundaries of each category:

Countries of origin: Roma minorities are said to consist of between 8–10 million people living in every European Union Member State country (apart from Malta) comprising of 26 nationalities (EC, 2012).

Ethnicities: the Council of Europe suggests there are six main population groups denoted by the term 'Roma', and that each group contains many sub-groups: Roma, Sinti, Kale, Gypsies, Romanichals, Travellers, Yenish (Council of Europe, 2012).

Languages: An estimated 8–10 million Roma people live across Europe and speak the varieties of European languages according to context, nationality and background, which can be multiple. An estimated 3.5

² Here I do not want to dismiss the work achieved by inter-sectionality. Kóczé's (2009) paper on the lack of inter-sectionality in empirical research on Roma minorities, for example, is an excellent contribution to understanding the importance of intra-ethnic gender differences, and would sit very well with the current discussions on super-diversity.

million of these people also speak a Romani language. The University of Manchester Romani project says there are broadly 4–5 major divisions of Romani dialects, although it should be noted that all Romani speakers are bilingual and there can be a distinctive divide between generations and knowledge of different dialects³.

Gender: there are researched disparities between Roma men and Roma women, with Roma women more likely to have a lower education, less access to health care and greater poverty than their male counterparts. For examples: three-quarters of Romani women do not complete primary education (compared with one in five men from Roma communities) and nearly a third is illiterate (compared with 1 in 20 women from majority communities) (United Nations Development Programme, 2006).

Access to structural resources: significant differences are reported on access to education, employment, health resources and housing in different countries: for example, in Hungary and Spain, at least seven out of 10 Roma and non-Roma children are reported to attend pre-school or kindergarten, whilst in Greece, less than 10% of Roma children are reported to be in pre-school or kindergarten compared with less than 50% of non-Roma children (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2012: 13⁴). There is a similar diverse picture of employment (FRA, 2012: 17).

Migration: despite popular representations of Roma as primarily nomadic or as illegal immigrants, in Europe, only between 5–20 percent of Roma are nomadic and the large majority of Roma who migrate have the right to do so (Parliamentary Assembly Report, 2012).

The above gives a broad, brushstroke overview of Roma minorities from primarily quantitative data that presents its own methodological and theoretical

³ These estimates and information are from the University of Manchester Romani project, see: <http://romani.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/whatis/status/diversity.shtml> (accessed 30 August 2013).

⁴ The FRA 2012 report draws on two surveys which interviewed 22,203 Roma and non-Roma people across 11 EU Member States, providing information on 84,287 household members.

problems (see Messing, this volume). However, what this overview does show is the importance of capturing the diversities not just of ethnic identities but of a myriad of life experiences in different contexts.

This article is not simply a plea for greater sensitivity towards understanding the complexity of experiences faced by Roma minorities, but a determined break away from trying to understand 'who are the Roma?' to focusing on 'who defines who is Roma and what for?' (see McGarry, this volume) and 'how do Roma people live?' (see Clough Marinaro and Daniele, and Roman, this volume), a break that demands attention to both the broader homogenising public discourses as well as the everyday practices of ordinary people. Such a shift requires not only a call for more detailed, empirical research, but also a wider, theoretical reflection on what our research achieves. This article considers how we might generate new directions by elaborating on the usefulness of 'super-diversity' in research on Roma minorities.

Overview of the article

In 2010, anthropologist Michael Stewart put forward a challenge to academics researching Roma minorities:

[...] the all-pervasive methodological nationalism of anthropological and other social scientific approaches produces false and misleading accounts of Romani lives in Europe today[...] therefore, rich and honest analysis of Romany lives demands that authors transcend the 'ethnic' frame of reference. (Stewart, 2010: 2)

This article takes up the challenge of seeing how authors might 'transcend the "ethnic" frame of reference' in three steps. In the first step, this article takes up the challenge of using 'ethnicity' in conjunction with Roma populations and argues that a collective, critical understanding of ethnicity is needed in order to comprehend what diversity means in contemporary society. This section starts with an overview of the wider debates on ethnicity, diversity and integration, followed by a consideration of how 'ethnicity' has been approached with regards

to Roma populations in academia. I argue that there are still some very basic (yet complex) questions facing any researchers working with Roma populations, namely: What do we mean by 'Roma' or what do we mean by 'ethnicity' in our work? This leads to the question: what do we study when we study 'ethnicity' or 'Roma'?

The article then moves to step two, looking for a potential new direction. The concept of 'super-diversity' (put forward by Vertovec in 2007) works towards a collective understanding of how to research and communicate findings on increasingly diverse, complex and fragmented populations in contemporary societies. Vertovec writes about moving away from ethnicity-only based notions of groups to look at a 'dynamic interplay of variables' that intends to capture the kinds of complexities that people experience in contemporary society (Vertovec, 2007: 1024). 'Super-diversity' is currently gaining wider currency among a variety of academics and policy actors and is said to potentially provide a common dialogue about minority groups. This article looks at what super-diversity might bring to research concerning Roma minorities and what that might mean for the status or approach to ethnicity in such work. As 'super-diversity' has yet to be used in conjunction with Roma minorities, careful consideration of the challenges are outlined. The analysis concludes with a third step that focuses on the critical use of diversity and ethnicity. The main challenge ahead is that any work that includes 'Roma' in the current climate requires careful, critical attention to the use of ethnicity. This article contends that a critical application of the main tenets of 'super-diversity' has the potential to draw together researchers on Roma minorities and join in wider discussions on minority integration to work towards a better understanding of ways to investigate and challenge inequality and discrimination.

First step: understanding the limits of diversity in Romani studies

The use of the term 'diversity', along with terms such as 'ethnicity', 'race' and 'inclusion' have been 'discursively entangled' with multicultural ideas (Hall,

2000a: 209). "It's good to be different" might be the motto of our times' wrote Malik in 2002, noting how the celebration of difference, respect for pluralism and the affirmation of identity politics have all been regarded as the assurances of a progressive, antiracist outlook. In multiculturalist discourses, terms such as 'ethnicity' or 'ethnic origin' became more current as a way to break free of the essentialising or racialising connotations often suggested by 'race', although others argue that changing terms just masked racialised connotations, couching them in more acceptable terms (Banton, 2012).

The main problem critics have with diversity in multiculturalist terms is its proposition of ethnic groupings as the basis of individual experience. The logic follows that it is through targeting ethnic groups and their specific culture/traditions/problems that social integration can occur. Whilst multicultural policies themselves are not homogeneous and have emerged and manifested under different historical conditions, often in non-linear ways, the idea of ethnic groups as the basis of society occurs across all multicultural thinking. Diversity in terms of ethnic groups reifies those groups and becomes a fixing discourse:

The more 'ethnicity' matters, the more its characteristics are represented as relatively fixed, inherent within a group, transmitted from generation to generation, not just by culture and education, but by biological inheritance, stabilized above all by kinship and endogamous marriage rules. (Hall, 2000a: 223)

Thus the emphasis on ethnicity becomes an over-focus on certain individual and group traits, leading to a limited, fixed 'billiard ball' approach to multiculturalism that places people in separate spheres that they rarely keep to in every life (Kraus 2011: 12) and in fact might 'accentuate(s) the very features on which their exclusion is based' (Faist, 2009: 177).

The concepts of 'diversity' and 'ethnicity' have proved problematic in their use with Roma populations. Mayall notes that, from the 1990s, it is possible to 'identify two clearly defined and antagonistic camps in Romani studies: on the

one hand there are those who argue for an ethnic definition, and on the other there are those who favour a socio-historical approach'. Mayall does not underplay the divisive effect of these two 'camps':

The ferocity and significance of the divisions have led to accusations of misrepresentation and censorship, scathing academic reviews, bitter pre-publications exchanges, and to a situation where prejudice and whim can overcome objectivity and experience. (Mayall, 2004: 3–4)

These two main camps are still the main paradigms that many academics in Romani studies lean towards and still form the basis of divisions in academia today. They are therefore worth looking at in more detail. I contribute to these discussions with one major contention: I argue that, while articulating different opinions on the relevance of ethnicity for Roma populations, both camps still orient to certain notions of 'groupness' that can remain fixed and limiting in its proposition of a type of Roma person.

First camp: an 'ethnicity'-oriented approach

'The fundamental debate', writes Mayall, 'is whether foreign origin and ancestry should be used as the explanatory mechanism for unravelling the true nature of Gypsy identity, physiognomy, language, collective memory, nomenclature, culture, attitudes and behaviour' (Mayall, 2004: 11). Whilst there are few accurate records of how 'the Roma' came to be a diaspora in Europe, a commonly quoted 'fact' is that Gypsies originated in northern India and moved west across the Middle East and Europe 1,000 years ago: a 'fact' arguably created by Gypsiologists in the 19th century to consolidate a popularly held romantic/exotic idea that Gypsies were descended from the lowest class of Indians. This remains a popular idea today (Bhopal and Myers, 2008: 4; Mayall, 2004: 6; Willems, 1997: 56–61).

However, while firm historical records may be scarce, the study of language has proven key to illuminating connections to India, as Ian Hancock summarises:

It has been the Gypsy language, or rather the study of its fragmented dialects, more than any other single factor which has led to the general acceptance of an Indian origin for its speakers. (Hancock, 1988: 183)

Whilst linguistic evidence continues to reveal historic routes of certain groups (Matras 2002), the wider take-up of discussions on the Indic-origin of Roma populations has not been positive, as Lemon notes, 'everywhere, Indic origins often have been reduced from historical narrative to a source of stereotypes about India projected onto Roma' (Lemon, 2000 84). The focus of linguistic research on 'origin' and 'Romani as one language' has been highly criticised by social historian Willems, who writes that not only has such an approach decontextualised Roma, but that 'the criterion of language is utterly inadequate to clarify why people were (or still are) defined as Gypsies' (Willems, 1997: 18). In his book *In Search of the True Gypsy*, Willems details how scholars in Romani studies have drawn heavily, and uncritically, on 19th century authors who were influenced by the politics and romanticist discourses around Gypsies at the time and often who had never engaged widely with Roma populations. Willems, along with other social historians such as Cottaar and Lucassen (sometimes known as the 'Dutch school', van Baar, 2011: 83), see 'ethnicity as a death-trap' (Willems, 2001). This brings me on to the 'second camp' outlined by Mayall, that questions whether 'ethnicity' is useful at all in discussions about Roma minorities.

Second camp: taking a 'cultural' or 'socio-historical' approach

Willems, Cottaar and Lucassen take an approach that is not against Roma ethnic identity *per se*, but rather they caution against its historical formations and influence on current usage. For a detailed discussion on their positions vis-à-vis the more determined 'ethnic' approach adopted by linguists, see van Baar, 2011: 77–105. Here I contribute to the discussions by suggesting there are two broad divisions in the 'against-ethnicity' camp. On the one hand, anthropologists favour a 'cultural' approach that is not based on fixed notions of ethnicity. On the other, sociologists have critiqued this cultural approach as romanticising cultural difference, and instead emphasise poverty as the prevalent factor in many Roma

people's lives. Here I outline the two positions and suggest that whilst seemingly taking differing approaches, both anthropologists and sociologists end up in the same ideological positioning – that is, seeing Roma in terms of 'a' group.

In anthropology, Judith Okely was one of the prominent anthropologists who first questioned the premise of Indian-origins. While she did not argue against the concept of ethnicity for the Traveller Gypsies she studied in the UK, she did question the basis of that ethnicity and the significance of Indian origins and nomadism (Okely, 1983). Other anthropologists have also noted a similar lack of interest in origins in the populations they have studied. For example, Stewart writes 'talk of Indian origins unnecessarily exoticizes the Gypsies and [...] it ignores their own view of themselves' (1997: 28); and Gay y Blasco noted a lack of interest towards their origins within the Gitano group in Spain she studied (1999: 50, 2002).

Nevertheless, while not seeing an explicit ethnic identity in the communities they study, these anthropologists would not dispute the 'groupness' of these people, arguing that a coherent identity is created through a continual articulation of their difference from non-Roma, or other Roma groups, and their self-conscious adoption of the 'Gypsy-way'. By 'a kind of internal emigration', wrote Stewart about the Vlach Rom community he studied in Hungary, 'they created a place of their own in which they could feel at home, a social space composed according to their own ethic of relatedness' (Stewart, 1997: 28). The phrase 'Gypsy way' has been used in anthropological writings to explain how every aspect of a Roma person's existence is influenced by their certain Roma culture, from friendships to driving a car and taste in home decorations, called the 'Gypsy way' in Liégeois (1986: 85); 'way of being' in Gay y Blasco (1999: 176); 'independent way' in Okely (1983: 77); 'Gypsy way' in Stewart (1997: 17–94); 'marime' or 'Rom way of life' in Sutherland (1986: 8).

Such a focus on cultural resources has led to criticisms from some sociologists who say that anthropologists reify Roma culture, creating an image of 'the eternal Roma', when issues of poverty are far more pressing (Ladányi and

Szelényi, 2003: 50). Such work can over-focus on difference from non-Roma rather than exploring similarities and dynamics across populations (Lemon, 2000: 3; Tremlett, 2009a, 2013). This is an important debate as it pivots on whether culture has been dismissed as poverty or whether poverty becomes the overwhelming feature of a community.

Bringing together these positions, I argue here that anthropologists and sociologists who question the use of ethnicity end up at *the same ideological position* as those who argue for an ethnic-oriented approach. The basic premise is that there are 'groups', it's just a question of deciding whether to focus on their language, poverty or culture as the pivot of their identity⁵. All sides end up with a 'mosaic' type template – there may be lots of pieces, but they still make up one big picture, a kind of heterogeneous approach to diversity:

The world's Gypsy population form a mosaic of small diverse groups. Two essential considerations follow. First, a mosaic is a whole whose component features **are linked** to one another. The whole is structured by **these links** that run through it. [...]...the parts, while essential to the composition of **the whole**, acquire their importance and their *raison d'être* only in **the framework of the whole** that holds them together. (Liégeois, 1986: 49–50) [my emphasis]

In this approach, the diversity of the Roma is emphasised and extolled on the one hand while on the other, the research seeks to discover and explain the variety of 'Romas' in increasing detail.

The problem with this 'mosaic' approach is that it depends on 'links' to a 'framework' or 'whole' (see the words in bold above), which suggests a pre-conceived template of what the Roma population is. Paul Gilroy calls this

⁵ Whether to see Roma people as primarily a cultural group or a group mired in a culture of poverty also affects how policymakers approach these communities and what legal directives are seen as most useful, for example a 'cultural' approach might focus on building up confidence in the use of Romani language in public places; while a 'poverty-focused' approach might look more towards redistribution of resources, e.g. increasing benefits to the poorest in society or giving scholarships to poorer people to encourage further education (Tremlett, 2009b).

approach a kind of 'mosaic pluralism' in which 'each self-sustaining and carefully segregated element is located so as to enhance a larger picture' (Gilroy, 2006: 39–40). The 'mosaic' is bound together by definitions of 'who' the Roma are, with studies producing more and more varieties (they are predominantly cultural, or familial, or poor, or linguistically connected). With this approach, academic papers can become very descriptive on different communities or policy/political situations, creating more and more pieces, but without critiquing the wider picture of 'the Roma' they are contributing to. 'There must be recognition', says Gilroy, 'that diversity means more than just feeding and reproducing the particularity of groups' (2006: 43). Even when embracing heterogeneity, the 'mosaic' approach simply fragments the picture of 'the Roma', still leaving the potential of limiting talk about 'the collective world view' of 'the Gypsies' that can easily slip into essentialised talk.

The problems encountered with labelling and conceptualisations of 'ethnicity' might lead us to wonder why we hold on to the notion of ethnicity at all. In fact, the current discussions on 'super-diversity' actually argue for moving away from focusing on ethnicity, seeing ethnicity as too often providing a 'misleading, one-dimensional appreciation of contemporary diversity' (Vertovec, 2007: 1025). This brings me on to the second step of the paper, in which I look at how current writing on 'super-diversity' might be usefully applied to academic work on Roma minorities.

Second step: implications of super-diversity and being 'beyond ethnicity'

If we are to comprehend the types of diversities and social transformations that Roma people are a part of in modern societies, it is important to recognise that the current usage of ethnicity, heterogeneity and diversity are no longer sufficient and that we need a new direction. Super-diversity is a way to encapsulate this shift in direction with a full acknowledgement that group categorisation has become exceptionally problematic, and there is an urgent need to understand more of what Blommaert and Varis call a 'heuristic for

engaging with this enormous and rapidly changing domain of authenticity'. This recognises that there are 'no guarantees' for any cultural system,

[...] we see such cultures as things that are perpetually subject to learning practices. One is never a 'full' member of any cultural system, because the configurations of features are perpetually changing, and one's fluency of yesterday need not guarantee fluency tomorrow. (Blommaert and Varis, 2011: 2)

The question is how to apply this to the situation of Roma minorities. In this second step of the article, I have identified three main challenges:

(1) The idea of 'super-diversity' has originated from the experience of migration in the UK and the specific histories and contexts that implies. This needs careful adaptation to all Roma across Europe, particularly as many Roma populations reside in Central and Eastern Europe, which has markedly different historical, political and economic contexts to the UK.

(2) The focus on migration in current literature on super-diversity may tap too easily into the misunderstanding of all Roma minorities as nomadic.

(3) The proposition of super-diversity to go 'beyond ethnicity' might hold the danger of losing sight of ethnicity all together.

First, the majority of Roma live in Central and Eastern Europe, which has been transformed by the end of the Cold War. The changing financial markets, and accession of many former socialist countries into the European Union has seen an array of measures, recommendations and funding packages 'propelled into old, complex cultures and authoritarian polities' (Hall, 2000a: 214). The social consequences have been huge, reaching across Europe and are still ongoing. Alongside 'uneven globalisation and failed modernization', financial and welfare systems have been in dire straits across the region while older ethnic, religious nationalisms have seen a resurgence that have combined with new emergent forms of ethnicity and politics (Hall, 2000a: 214). These countries were not simply 'born' as nation-states post 1990 – nationalisms emerged prior to nation-

state formations, and multiple identifications have had long, convoluted and at times damning and differentiated histories across the Central and Eastern European area. These experiences have produced some very different understandings of 'race', 'ethnicity' or 'minority' that have at times come into conflict with western thinking, and it is doubtful whether non-English/German/French writers in the region are ever read by Western counterparts that might illuminate such conceptual challenges (Buchowski 2004). Any application of 'super-diversity' would need a keen awareness of the histories and the specific inequalities and injustices that have emerged.

Second, the focus of super-diversity from the UK perspective is on migration, as this has been a major source of change in UK society, particularly since the 1990s. This insinuation, that migrants are the main instigators of change, could tap into a common misunderstanding of Roma as nomads. Mayall says the conflation between Gypsy and nomad is made as 'a simple equation [...] to be a nomad is to be a Gypsy, and to cease a nomadic way of life is to end being a Gypsy' (2004: 12). Mayall notes how this definition was enshrined in the UK's 1968 Caravan Sites Act, whilst for example in Italy other researchers have noted how 'nomad' and 'Gypsy' have been used together as political rhetorical devices across Europe to 'other' Roma populations (Clough Marinaro, 2003; Clough Marinaro and Daniele, this volume; Hepworth, 2012; Sigona, 2005). Any use of 'super-diversity' would need to be mindful of this political rhetoric that can assume a connection between 'Roma' and 'migrant' or 'nomad'. If super-diversity is linked to only migrants or migration in a narrow sense, then this would give the impression that it is only migration that causes super-diverse situations, and we may fail to look at non-migratory instances or 'super-local' developments of super-diversity.

These first two challenges deserve deeper interrogation than are possible within the parameters of this article, However, neither are possible to examine without understanding what we now do with the concept of 'ethnicity', the third and final challenge highlighted here and then considered more in-depth in the third step of the article. The challenge is that if we think 'beyond' ethnicity (as Vertovec recommends), we may lose sight of ethnicity. This can be problematic as the use

of ethnicity has at times been positive, for example in bringing about a greater understanding of Roma people in terms of creating a political voice, and moving away from deficit discourses based on 'deviant lifestyles'. Rather than disregarding 'simple ethnicity-focused approaches' (Vertovec, 2007: 1039), I would argue that we need to re-think *simplistic* ethnicity-focused approaches that fall into the danger of reifying ethnicity as an essentialised, fixed-group concept. This brings me onto the third step in my article which pushes this argument further. In this step I look at how to keep a critical notion of ethnicity in Romani studies alongside the idea of super-diversity.

Third step: towards a critical approach to ethnicity and diversity in research on Roma

This article has so far argued that dominant approaches to Roma minorities in academia fail to go far enough to break the mould of homogenising, damaging stereotypes of 'the Gypsy'. Simply acknowledging the heterogeneity of such minorities is inadequate as the supposed 'links' between different groups remains an unspoken, assumed relationship, causing an over-focus on particular groups without investigating cross-connections, similarities, changes in group formations and so on. Super-diversity was then introduced in the article as a relatively new way of thinking that is gaining credence with academics, policy-makers and other stake-holders. Super-diversity is useful for research on Roma minorities as it forces researchers out of their silos to notice and investigate the cross-cutting, multiple, hybrid components that feature in our everyday lives, from experiences of gender, sexuality, multi-media platforms (TV, internet etc), socio-economic status, disabilities, work environment, to the local environment and so on. Super-diversity is also a valuable concept as it does not claim one theoretical territory, making it a useful means of dialogue (and potentially a direction) across academic areas, policymakers and other stakeholders. In terms of looking at Roma minorities, however, this lack of theoretical territory can be problematic as the concepts of 'race' and 'ethnicity' are over-used and under-

discussed. This section now works to see what theoretical terrain could be used alongside super-diversity to allow a critical use of ethnicity.

Stuart Hall's work has been fundamental in reconceptualising ethnicity, particularly encapsulated by his pivotal formulation of 'new ethnicities' (1992a). New ethnicities, Hall argued, denotes a shift in the way of thinking about identity. In the post-modern era, identity is no longer a stable subject but becomes a "moveable feast" formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us' (1992b: 277). New ethnicities are thus expressions of the dissolution of a certain type of identity, creating a 'non-coercive and a more diverse conception of ethnicity' (1992a: 258), one that is not rooted in any prescribed, essentialised notions of what identity should be.

Hall calls this an 'anti-essentialist' approach to ethnicity, 'the politics of recognizing that all of us are composed of multiple social identities, not of one' (Hall, 2000b: 57). In this way it links to super-diversity's proposal of one person living across various categories rather than just inhabiting one. Terms such as pluralization, hybridity, multiple-identifications, unfinished identities and multi-acculturality are all used by scholars taking up these ideas to describe the many influences and categories that people can move between or embody. The major effects of an anti-essentialist approach to ethnicity are twofold. First, there becomes no guarantee of what ethnicity might be or become:

Because identifications change and shift, they can be worked on by political and economic forces outside of us and they can be articulated in different ways. There is absolutely no political guarantee already inscribed in an identity. There is no reason on God's earth why the film is good because a Black person made it. There is absolutely no guarantee that all the politics will be right because a woman does it. (Hall, 2000b: 57-58)

Second, as there are no guarantees, so there is not one authentic space that ethnicity inhabits. Ethnicity, so often spoken about only in conjunction with

ethnic minorities, is, in fact, about all people. All people are 'ethnically located' as 'our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are' (Hall, 1992a: 258). When ethnic identity does not need to depend on its essentialising equivalence with nationalism, imperialism, racism, it moves to being seen as part of who we are, as 'discursively constituted and situationally contingent' (Harris and Rampton, 2009: 99). This anti-essentialist theoretical approach does not require ethnicity to be left behind or forgotten – this is not going 'beyond' ethnicity, as Vertovec recommends in his central paper on super-diversity (2007: 1026). Instead, the notion of ethnicity is opened up. Rather than being stuck in 'simple ethnicity focused approaches' (Vertovec, 2007: 1039), this theoretical stance refuses *simplistic* notions of ethnicity.

All this is not entirely new to researchers studying Roma minorities. Hall's conceptualisations of ethnicity have already influenced some academics working on topics relating to Roma minorities. While these academics have not yet coalesced to form a coherent voice, they may well be beginning to form a 'new wave' of approaches that I argue the notion of super-diversity has the potential to consolidate. Here I briefly outline the work that has already been achieved in cultural studies, political science, sociology and empirical research. In cultural studies, the analysis of Roma presence in film, music and TV programmes both reveal the racialised roles at times imposed on Roma minorities (Bernáth and Messing, 2013; Imre, 2011, Kóczé 2009 and the work of Timea Junghaus), but also the possibilities of creativity from original output that can 'affirm anti-essentialist identities with the strategies of *mesztizaje* and *creolité*' (Imre, 2005: 95, see also Theodosiou, 2011). There is clear evidence that Roma people are not only public performers of such hybrid displays of identities, drawing on super-diverse repertoires, but are also members of the audience (Tremlett, 2012). Such research is in its infancy: while Roma people are known to be high consumers of art, literature, television programmes and avid users of social networking, there are to date few empirical studies devoted to such activities that might illuminate the uses and effects of such resources and technologies on everyday lives.

Making footnote reference to the work of anti-essentialist theorists including Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, political scientists such as Vermeersch advocate a critical view of the process of labelling:

To study the Romani movement means to study the process of labelling, categorization, and self-categorization in political action. A serious analysis should not simply focus on specific forms of lifestyle, traditions, descent, language use, and so forth; it should ask why and in what social and political circumstances such phenomena become generally accepted as markers of Romani identity. (Vermeersch, 2007: 3)

Here Vermeersch neatly summarises the need to look at diversity as social practice *alongside* the use of the term diversity in hegemonic discourses. Other political scientists have taken a similarly critical approach, analysing the trajectory of European institutional policy towards Roma minorities, revealing such problems as: the inconsistencies in delivering sustainable results in local areas via EU structural funding; the at-times fractious EU member state relationships and how that plays out in local contexts; and the corruption and co-option of funds aimed at Roma minorities (see also Agarín, this volume; McGarry, this volume, van Baar, 2011).

Moving to empirical research, sociologist Rogers Brubaker has been one of the leading scholars to recognise the importance of understanding the lived experiences of people. In his work on minority mobilisations in the 1980s and 1990s, Brubaker realised the political discourses he was researching and writing about could only go so far, and he needed to study the everyday practices and experiences of Roma people in order to understand what 'ethnicity' meant, as he reflects in the introduction to his empirical study of a Transylvanian town:

From a distance, it is all too easy to 'see' bounded and homogenous ethnic and national groups, to whom common interests, perceptions, intentions and volition can be attributed. Up close, on the other hand, risks losing sight of the larger contexts that shape experience and interaction. The study of large – and mid-scale structures and processes remains

indispensable, but I came to believe that it must be complemented by research pitched at a level close to everyday experience if one is to avoid unwarranted assumptions of “groupness” and capture the way ethnicity actually ‘works’. (2006: xiv)

Empirically, the two articles in this also volume display such a sensitivity – Roman’s article on the interactions between Finnish Roma and Romanian Gypsy migrants reveals how the wider political and policy-level focus on ‘the Roma’ would not work in the different citizenship/migrant and socio-economic experiences of Roma people in Helsinki. Clough Marinaro and Daniele’s article then shows how ‘Roma’ can be a term co-opted at the local level, where authenticity imbued by designating certain spokespeople can lead to suspicion and rejection (see also the ethnographic work discussed in Stewart 2013).

In my own empirical research in Hungary, I created three basic rules for my methodology that – while not entirely avoiding all essentialising labels – allowed me to be sensitive to and investigate essentialist claims. First, I included ‘non-Roma’ alongside ‘Roma’ (as broad, existing categories of people) who were living in a similar neighbourhood in a similar low socio-economic environment. This allowed me to compare and contrast different aspects of people’s lives to ensure I didn’t fall into the trap of assuming what I saw or heard was to do with ‘being Roma’ and not just ‘being from that neighbourhood’ or ‘being quite poor’ or ‘living in Hungary’. Second, rather than trying to focus on anything prescribed as ‘ethnic’ I focused on everyday life. While the people in my research knew I ran a club aimed at Roma children and had volunteered at the European Roma Rights Centre in Budapest, I kept saying that I was interested in everyday life, and kept asking them questions or hanging out with them whatever they were doing (watching TV, playing, chatting, going shopping, at school or work and so on). This helped me see a broad range of everyday practices and I could see when and where ‘Roma’ or ‘Gypsy’ became important, and to whom. Finally, I included visual representations (participants taking photographs of their everyday lives), which proved to be a creative activity that people enjoyed, and something that they could do without me being there. The resulting photographs and interviews

based on the images took me down many routes I hadn't thought of before. Such creative methodological approaches, I have argued, can help put anti-essentialism into practice (Tremlett, 2009a, 2013).

Nevertheless, any discussion that takes a position against essentialising concepts needs to take into account the dangers that go with taking such a stance that may serve to reject difference, leading back to an intolerance of groupness and difference as well as weakening the political voice. As Kabachnik writes, while purely cultural discourses are shown to be ineffectual, the notion of 'culture' should not, as a consequence, be avoided:

while some disavow the distinctive cultural practices of Gypsies and Travelers, I choose to highlight them. I do so not to essentialize cultures, nor to exaggerate their distinctiveness, but rather to point to the necessity of allowing people to follow their particular ways of life without the state interfering through policies of harassment or eradication. (Kabachnik, 2009: 463)

Kabachnik, along with other critiques of anti-essentialism, sees the danger of anti-essentialism as becoming too relativist 'since everything is in flux we should just give it up' with the peril of helping to 'reproduce the erasure of Gypsiness' (2009: 474–475).

However, the anti-essentialism concept as described by Hall does not purport to either deny difference or attempt forced assimilation. In fact, Hall says that anti-essentialist approaches can foreground culture. But rather than focus on whether difference is there or not, Hall says to focus instead on *making a difference*, in other words, focusing on a transference of power in cultural politics:

Now cultural strategies that can make a difference, that's what I'm interested in -- those that can make a difference and can shift the dispositions of power. (Hall, 1993: 105)

While Hall here was talking about how new popular culture can produce alternative narratives that can alter fixed, essentialised positionings of notion of 'race', we can also apply this to how our approaches to ethnicity in empirical research can have the ability to 'shift dispositions of power' by detailed, in-depth studies that take power, labelling and their relationship to everyday practice as central to the way people live and experience their lives.

Conclusion: making a difference without creating a difference

Combining super-diversity with existing anti-essentialist approaches to 'ethnicity' allows a direction in Romani studies that moves beyond a fixed or limiting notion of 'ethnicity', but without losing sight of ethnicity. Super-diversity can then form the lens with which to look at 'diversity' as both a discourse *and* social practice, reminding researchers in Romani studies of 'the complex dynamics of diversity both as social and cultural practice and as hegemonic discourse and regulation' (Arnaut, 2012: 12). Here it is important to emphasise the distinction between heterogeneity and hybridity as fundamental to creating a paradigm shift in Romani studies, understanding that current usage of 'heterogeneity' still does not break away from homogenising discourse (Tremlett 2009a).

The usefulness of super-diversity is that it moves the emphasis away from homogenising discourses and towards the more rapid social transformations that current societies witness today as a result of inequality or social mobility, inter-marriage, migration and transnationalism but also as a result of the availability of resources and repertoires through internet and communication technologies. In addition, super-diversity emphasises a shift away from the ideology of the 'nation-state' which dominates both popular representations and academic objects of analysis (e.g. ethnic minorities as bounded groups). Super-diversity can be seen as an emblematic departure from these types of representations. Super-diversity has a major advantage of being a collective that

can include many voices. The linking thread is the recognition of complexity, understanding complexity not as an aberration but as a feature of everyday life.

I have argued that researching Roma populations in the current climate requires a careful de-essentialisation of the debates without losing sight of ethnicity. This does not mean refusing the category 'Roma' in public discourses, as empirical researchers Harris and Rampton say, 'we are not advocating a retreat from larger generalisations about ethnicity and race in contemporary society, either in analysis or politics' (2009: 116). However, what Harris and Rampton do advocate is that 'in the process of abstracting and simplifying it is vital to refer back continuously to what's "lived" in the everyday' (116) This means recognising that claims made about Roma people should always refer to how people actually live – 'everyday constructs and practices' (117). The motivations behind the types of representations on display in both public discourses and local practices should be interrogated. Asking who has the power over representations in each situation should be at the heart of an anti-essentialist approach that is also for social justice and against the co-option of culture or power for the benefit of some at the expense of others. The heterogeneous *and hybrid* character implied in the term 'Roma populations' means a shift is required in research and policy making. Super-diversity, this article has argued, is a way of normalising such diversities rather than seeing them as a problem, thereby allowing us to create a collective direction to make a difference.

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