

Public Services Employees' Attitudes towards Roma in Greece: The Need for a Social Work Response

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Abstract

Health, education and municipal public services employees were surveyed to assess their attitudes towards the Roma people in Greece, in terms of their occupation and sociodemographic characteristics. The research sample included a total of 582 professionals of different public services (217 healthcare staff members, 248 teachers and 117 municipal employees). They completed a self-report questionnaire including sociodemographic data and a 43-item Questionnaire on Attitudes towards Roma. Results from analyses showed that an important part of the public services employees, with whom Roma come into direct contact when accessing healthcare, educational, as well as civil and municipal services, tend to exhibit negative attitudes and fear, intergroup anxiety and to hold negative stereotypes towards Roma. Also, they showed that the levels of prejudice are statistically significantly different with respect to occupational and sociodemographic factors. In particular, they differ in terms of occupation, level of education, living in areas with high Roma density, parenthood, age and years of professional experience. Implications for systematic interventions to change the public services employees' negative attitudes towards Roma are discussed.

Keywords: Attitudes, prejudices, Roma, public services, social work, Greece

1. Introduction: The social marginalisation of Roma people in Greece

Roma people are one of Greece's most underprivileged and marginalised social groups. They encounter difficulties in gaining access to key sectors, including housing, education, healthcare services, and employment (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2015). To date, Roma population figures in Greece are subject to uncertainty and underestimation. The Roma people are invisible in national indicators. They are not counted in the census, as they are not officially recognised as a minority group, and as such they are not recorded on the national monitoring systems of the public authorities. However, a combination of relevant sources puts their number at approximately 300,000 individuals (Ziomas, Bouzas & Spyropoulou, 2011), 3% of the country's total population. An important number of Roma live in racially segregated ghettos under inhuman conditions. These are usually communities entirely different from other residential areas. In comparison with the general population, Roma are associated with poor quality of life and health, increased mortality rates, high dropout rates from school, and extremely high unemployment rates (Asimopoulos et al., 2019).

The problems and the effects of these discriminatory practices against Roma, at both a physical and mental health level, are rather important. In particular, in comparison with the general population, the Roma people display considerably high levels of psychopathology, outward and inward hostility, transient and permanent anxiety, as well as external and internal shame (Kotrotsiou, 2014).

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2. Stigma and prejudice towards Roma

Discrimination, barriers and social exclusion suffered by the Roma people are mainly due to stereotyped views and prejudice attached to them over the years (Greek Ministry of Labor and Social Security, 2011). These are mainly based on ignorance and non acceptance of their cultural diversity (Morris, 2000). Attitudes refer to one's perceptions of the social phenomena. While interacting with other individuals, these influence his/her behaviour. Attitudes are shaped through an evolutionary process. They are an integral part of the socialisation process based on learning that takes place in the individual's direct or indirect environment (Olson & Zanna, 1993). Moreover, attitudes are characterised by the element of stability, as they are either not easily changeable or resistant to change. Likewise, prejudice refers to a preconceived opinion that is formed beforehand without knowledge or consideration of all the facts, and is usually both incorrect and discriminatory. Prejudice is defined as a uniform and firm defensive negative position towards members of a specific minority group. Prejudiced views are marked by a negative attitude towards an individual or a group, and include arbitrary generalisations and stereotyped beliefs about a person's race, ethnicity, religion and social class (Allport, 1954). In their Integrated Threat Theory, Stephan and Stephan (1996) note that prejudice is activated when people assume that their values and beliefs or social groups are under threat. The theory has identified four types of threats leading to prejudice: realistic threats, symbolic threats, negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety. Realistic threats can include threats to physical safety or health, and threats to economic and political power. Symbolic threats arise where there is a perceived difference between the values, beliefs and norms of the majority and minority groups, and are related to negative attitudes towards minority group members. Negative stereotypes refer to the behaviour exhibited by group members and it seems that these are related to feelings of fear and threat. Intergroup anxiety refers to the fear experienced when interacting with someone from a different social group. It has been shown that increased intergroup anxiety may result in greater prejudice. These threats are identified as predictors of negative attitudes towards minority group members.

Anti-Roma prejudice is observed, at both interpersonal and intergroup level, in public discourse, the mass media, in public policy decisions, as well as in institutional practices all over Europe (Kende et al., 2017). It seems that despite the repeal of discriminatory legislation, Roma communities are still subject to racist treatment and marginalisation in Europe (CRE, 2016). A transnational European study has demonstrated that after drug addicts, heavy drinkers and people with a criminal record, the Roma are the fourth most stigmatised group across Europe (Barbulescu & Beaudonnet, 2013). According to the Special Eurobarometer report on Discrimination in the EU (2012), 40 % of the European citizens would not like to have Roma neighbours in their communities and 40 % would feel uncomfortable if their children had Roma schoolmates. Also, European citizens acknowledge, in their entirety, the existence of negative attitudes towards Roma, while 75 % of the participants agree that Roma are a group of people at high risk of discrimination.

In Greece, little research has been done on anti-Roma attitudes and prejudice. According to the Special Eurobarometer report on Discrimination in the EU (2015), 50 % of the Greek respondents declared to be uncomfortable about working with a Roma person and 79 % said that they would not be at ease if their son or daughter had a love relationship with a Roma person. In 2019, a survey conducted in EU Member States showed that 72 % of the Greek population has unfavourable opinion towards Roma people (Pew Research Centre, 2019). Also, a survey conducted by Asimopoulos et al. (2019) has indicated that a significant part of the staff employed in the Greek public health sector, despite the existing codes of professional ethics, tends to hold anti-Roma prejudice and stereotyped perceptions, which exert a negative influence on the way they treat Roma whenever these people try to gain access to the necessary healthcare services. In the context of the deep economic crisis that Greece has been experiencing since 2010, and which has exacerbated the social inequalities, has accelerated the social exclusion process, has strengthened the populist, nationalist and xenophobic perceptions and has led to a rise in racism (Vieta & Poynting, 2016), the study of anti-Roma prejudice is of particular importance. According to the National Roma Strategy Framework of the Greek Ministry of Labour and Social Security (2011), negative stereotypes and prejudice against this minority group are serious obstacles to the successful implementation of the relevant social inclusion measures.

3. Methodology

3.1 Purpose and research hypothesis

The present study, which was conducted in the period from January to March 2017, intended to examine the attitudes of the staff employed in the public sector, including healthcare, education and municipal authorities, towards the Roma people, in the region of West Attica, in terms of their occupation and sociodemographic characteristics. It should be noted that the region of West Attica is home to a large number of Roma people, that is 15 000 to 30 000 individuals representing about 20 % of its total population.

Three hypotheses were examined. In particular, that the professionals' attitudes are negatively oriented, that there is a positive relationship between the attitudes, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, negative stereotypes experienced by the professionals towards the Roma people, and that the attitudes of the professionals vary according to their occupation, age, place of residence, marital status and parenthood.

3.2 Sample

A total of 582 professionals participated in this survey. The sample included 217 healthcare staff members employed in West Attica General Hospital, 248 primary school teachers employed by the West Attica Directorate of Primary Education, and 117 municipal employees of the region of West Attica.

3.3 Measurement tools

The survey included two self-administered questionnaires used to collect demographic information and the respondents' attitudes towards the Roma. In particular:

A) **Demographic Data Questionnaire**

The questionnaire consists of 10 questions soliciting the following information from the participants: sex, age, nationality, marital status, place of origin, educational level, professional qualification, and years of professional experience.

B) **Questionnaire on Attitudes towards Roma based on Prejudice towards Immigrants by Stephan et al. (1999)**

The questionnaire proposed by Stephan et al. (1999) was designed to study the attitudes towards migrants and, in general, out-groups, and was adapted in order to be used for the purpose of the present study about the Roma people.

The participants were asked to rate their agreement/disagreement with a series of 43 statements on a 10-point Likert Scale. The questionnaire includes and investigates four factors: a) attitudes, b) symbolic threats, c) intergroup anxiety, and d) negative stereotypes. The factor related to the attitudes of the social group members reflects their negative interaction with out-group members. It includes 12 different evaluative and emotional reactions towards out-groups. The scale ranges from 0 (no hatred at all) to 9 (extreme hatred). The symbolic threat factor is mainly related to customs, values, rules, norms, beliefs and behaviours posing a threat to the predominant view of the group. It consists of 7 items rated on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). The factor of intergroup anxiety refers to subjectively perceived threats felt by the members of a social group during intergroup interactions. Possible negative outcomes for the self may include being embarrassed, rejected, ridiculed, or exploited. The factor consists of 12 items rated on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 10 (extremely). The negative stereotypes factor serves a variety of functions, including providing expectations for social interaction in relation to providing interpretations for behaviour and justifying the subordination of minority groups. This factor includes 9 items rated on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (very unfavourable) to 10 (very favourable).

3.4 Ethical issues

All participants were informed of the research purposes and their voluntary participation in the study. They were also informed that they would not have to provide any personal data, and were assured about the anonymity and confidentiality of their answers. The research protocol was submitted to, reviewed and approved by the Scientific Committee of the West Attica General Hospital, the Region of West Attica and the West Attica Directorate of Primary Education.

3.5 Statistical analysis

Normal distributed variables are expressed as mean (standard deviation); while variables with skewed distribution are expressed as median (interquartile range).

Qualitative variables were expressed as absolute and relative frequencies. Student's t-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were computed for the comparison of mean values. Bonferroni correction was used in order to control for type I error. Pearson's correlation coefficients were used to explore the association of two continuous variables. Correlation coefficient between 0.1 and 0.3 were considered low, between 0.31 and 0.5 moderate and those over 0.5 were considered high. Multiple linear regression analysis were used with dependent the scores in the under study scales. Adjusted regression coefficients (β) with standard errors (SE) were computed from the results of the linear regression analyses. All reported p values are two-tailed. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ and analyses were conducted using SPSS statistical software (version 22.0).

3.6 Results

A total sample of 582 participants was analyzed (27.8% men and 72.2% women) with mean age 40.7 years (SD=8.4). Sample characteristics in total and according to profession are presented in Table 1. 248 of the participants were teachers, 217 were health professionals and 117 were municipal employees.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

	Total sample	Teachers	Health professionals	Municipal employees
	N (%) N=582	N (%) N=248	N (%) N=217	N (%) N=117
Sex				
Men	161(27.8)	51 (20.6)	56 (25.9)	54 (46.2)
Women	419(72.2)	196 (79.4)	160 (74.1)	63 (53.8)
Age, mean (SD)	40.7(8.4)	37.7 (9)	40.8 (10.0)	46.2 (8)
Family status				
Unmarried	212(36.7)	113 (46.1)	72 (33.3)	27 (23.1)
Married	331(57.3)	121 (49.4)	125 (57.9)	85 (72.6)
Divorced	33(5.7)	10 (4.1)	18 (8.3)	5 (4.3)
Widowed	2(0.3)	1 (0.4)	1 (0.5)	0 (0)
Number of children, median (IQR)	1 (0 - 2)	1 (0 - 2)	2 (0 - 2)	2 (1 - 2)
Grown up in:				
Athens	290(50.1)	131 (53)	102 (47.4)	57 (48.7)
Other big city	148(25.6)	57 (23.1)	58 (27)	33 (28.2)
Small town	77(13.3)	32 (13)	28 (13)	17 (14.5)
Village	64(11.1)	27 (10.9)	26 (12.6)	10 (8.5)
Nationality				
Greek	577(99.7)	246 (100)	215 (99.5)	116 (99.1)
Other	2(0.3)	0 (0)	1 (0.5)	1 (0.9)
Educational level				
Middle school	102(31)	0 (0)	43 (20.3)	59 (50.4)
High school	82(24.9)	0 (0)	66 (31.1)	16 (13.7)
University	77(23.4)	191 (77)	50 (23.6)	27 (23.1)
Master	68(20.7)	57 (23)	53 (25)	15 (12.8)
Residence in West Attika				
Yes	320(56.0)	109 (45.2)	127 (59.6)	84 (71.8)
No	251(44.0)	132 (54.8)	86 (40.4)	33 (28.2)
Years of professional experience, mean (SD)	15.0(8.9)	12.9 (7.8)	13.9 (8.5)	20.7 (8.6)

Table 2 shows Attitudes and Symbolic threats in association with demographic and work related characteristics.

Table 2. Attitudes and Symbolic threats in association with demographic and work related characteristics

	Attitudes	P	Symbolic threats	P
	Mean (SD)		Mean (SD)	
Sex				
Men	5.28 (2.06)	0.033‡	7.06 (1.72)	0.765‡
Women	4.86 (2.08)		7.01 (1.63)	
Age, r ⁺⁺	0.11	0.027	-0.02	0.613
Married				
No	4.72 (2.09)	0.011‡	6.88 (1.7)	0.062‡
Yes	5.17 (2.05)		7.14 (1.62)	
Number of children, r ⁺⁺	0.17	<0.001	0.10	0.030
Grown up in:				
Athens	4.94 (2.12)	0.770+	7.12 (1.73)	0.268+
Other big city	5.09 (2.05)		6.99 (1.53)	
Small town - Village	4.95 (2.01)		6.84 (1.6)	
Residence in West Attika				
No	4.52 (1.97)	<0.001‡	6.75 (1.69)	<0.001‡
Yes	5.34 (2.1)		7.25 (1.61)	
Group of professionals				
Municipal employees	5.88 (2.08)	<0.001+	7.55 (1.74)	<0.001+
Teachers	4.00 (1.83)		6.55 (1.47)	
Health professionals	5.63 (1.86)		7.29 (1.68)	
Years of professional experience, r ⁺⁺	0.09	0.046	-0.02	0.570

‡Student's t-test; +ANOVA; ++Pearson's correlation coefficient

It was found that Attitudes and Symbolic threats scores differ significantly among participants with different occupation. After Bonferroni correction it was found that teachers had significantly lower Attitudes score compared to municipal employees ($p < 0.001$) and health professionals ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, teachers had significantly lower Symbolic threats score compared to municipal employees ($p < 0.001$) and health professionals ($p < 0.001$).

Also, it was found that Intergroup anxiety and Negative stereotypes scores differ significantly among participants with different occupation (Table 3).

Table 3. Intergroup anxiety and Negative stereotypes in association with demographic and work related characteristics

	Intergroup anxiety		Negative stereotypes	
	Mean (SD)	P	Mean (SD)	P
Sex				
Men	5.94 (2.17)		6.61 (1.84)	0.120‡
Women	5.84 (2.39)		6.34 (1.81)	
Age, r ⁺⁺	0.11	0.030	0.05	0.264
Married				
No	5.49 (2.26)		6.19 (1.84)	0.009‡
Yes	6.17 (2.34)		6.6 (1.79)	
Number of children, r ⁺⁺	0.24	<0.001	0.13	0.006
Grown up in:				
Athens	5.94 (2.32)		6.51 (1.85)	0.298+
Other big city	5.86 (2.29)		6.41 (1.8)	
Small town - Village	5.73 (2.37)		6.22 (1.76)	
Residence in West Attika				
No	5.37 (2.27)		6.02 (1.78)	<0.001‡
Yes	6.27 (2.32)		6.74 (1.8)	

Group of professionals				
Municipal employees	6.79 (2.38)	<0.001+	7 (1.91)	<0.001+
Teachers	4.96 (2.15)		5.68 (1.53)	
Health professionals	6.41 (2.12)		6.95 (1.78)	
Years of professional experience, r++	0.11	0.008		0.138
		0.06		

‡Student's t-test; +ANOVA; ++Pearson's correlation coefficient

After Bonferroni correction it was found that teachers had significantly lower Intergroup anxiety score compared to municipal employees ($p < 0.001$) and health professionals ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, teachers had significantly lower Negative stereotypes score compared to municipal employees ($p < 0.001$) and health professionals ($p < 0.001$).

Correlation analysis (Table 4) shown that all study dimensions had a significant and positive correlation.

Table 4. Correlation coefficients between study dimensions

	Symbolic threats	Intergroup anxiety	Negative stereotypes
Attitudes	0.45	0.67	0.62
Symbolic threats		0.47	0.54
Intergroup anxiety			0.63

Note: All correlation coefficients were significant at $p < 0.001$

When multiple regression was conducted it was found that higher scores in Attitudes scale were independently and significantly associated with having more children, living in West Attica and being municipal employees or health professionals (Table 5).

Table 5. Multiple linear regression results for Attitudes and Symbolic threats as dependent variables

	Attitudes			Symbolic threats		
	β^+	SE ⁺⁺	P	β^+	SE ⁺⁺	P
Sex						
Men (reference)						
Women	-0.35	0.20	0.081	-0.13	0.17	0.441
Age	0,00	0.02	0.921	-0.02	0.01	0.094
Married						
No (reference)						
Yes	-0.25	0.24	0.305	0.07	0.20	0.734
Number of children	0,33	0.12	0.005	0.11	0.10	0.258
Grown up in:						
Athens (reference)						
Other big city	-0.03	0.21	0.894	-0.15	0.17	0.367
Small town - Village	-0.15	0.21	0.490	-0.18	0.18	0.134
Residence in West Attika						
No (reference)						
Yes	0.50	0.18	0.006	0.40	0.15	0.008
Group of professionals						
Teachers (reference)						
Municipal employees	1.61	0.25	<0.001	0.99	0.21	<0.001
Health professionals	1.50	0.19	<0.001	0.77	0.16	<0.001
Years of professional experience	-0,02	0.01	0.177	-0.01	0.01	0.459

+regression coefficient; ++Standard Error

Also, higher scores in Symbolic threats scale were independently and significantly associated with living in West Attica and being municipal employees or health professionals.

Moreover it was found that higher scores in Intergroup anxiety scale were independently and significantly associated with having more children, living in West Attica and being municipal employees or health professionals (Table 6). Also, higher scores in Negative stereotypes scale were independently and significantly associated with having more children, living in West Attica and being municipal employees or health professionals.

Table 6. Multiple linear regression results for Intergroup anxiety and Negative stereotypes scores as dependent variables

	Intergroup anxiety			Negative stereotypes		
	β^+	SE ⁺⁺	P	β^+	SE ⁺⁺	P
Sex						
Men (reference)						
Women	-0.08	0.23	0.714	-0.33	0.18	0.070
Age	-0,01	0.02	0.614	-0.02	0.01	0.164
Married						
No (reference)						
Yes	-0.47	0.28	0.090	-0.08	0.22	0.712
Number of children	0,60	0.13	<0.001	0.25	0.10	0.017
Grown up in:						
Athens (reference)						
Other big city	-0.21	0.23	0.368	-0.20	0.18	0.274
Small town - Village	-0.41	0.24	0.090	-0.28	0.19	0.112
Residence in West Attika						
No (reference)						
Yes	0.62	0.21	0.003	0.46	0.16	0.005
Group of professionals						
Teachers (reference)						
Municipal employees	1.41	0.28	<0.001	1.10	0.22	<0.001
Health professionals	1.21	0.22	<0.001	1.21	0.17	<0.001
Years of professional experience	-0,01	0.02	0.395	-0.01	0.01	0.678

+regression coefficient; ++Standard Error

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to undertake a comparative research on the prejudice and stereotypes held by health, education and municipal public services employees towards the Roma people, in Greece. The study has demonstrated that an important part of these people, with whom Roma come into direct contact when accessing healthcare, educational, as well as civil and municipal services, tend to exhibit negative attitudes and fear, intergroup anxiety and to hold negative stereotypes towards Roma. The findings of this study are in line with the results of several studies carried out in other countries to examine the barriers faced by Roma when accessing these services. Gill's study (2010) has shown that many professionals' perceptions of Roma people are influenced by negative stereotypes spread by the media, and that these professionals have a limited understanding of the Roma culture and needs. Cleemput's study (2010) has produced similar results concerning anti-Roma stereotypes held by professionals. These perceive Roma as difficult and provocative individuals raising discomfort and anxiety among the rest of the population. Also, Parry et al. study (2007) on Roma health status has demonstrated that racism based on staff prejudice is to blame for the inverse relationship between health needs and use of health services. Goward et al. (2006) and Jeffrey et al. (2000) suggest that staff members lack knowledge on Roma beliefs and culture. Due to this fact, as Garrett (2005) notes, the Roma people may be further labelled and experience further restrictive and/or punitive intervention because their culture is ignored or pathologised. Anti-Roma racist behaviours in public services, in the form of indirect and direct discrimination arising out of prejudice, lack of recognition and pathologisation of Roma culture, are also confirmed by formal reports, such as the Commission for Racial Equality Scotland (CRES) report (2006).

Moreover, this research has identified some positive correlations among all the scales related to negative attitudes, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes towards Roma. It has become apparent that the higher the score was in one of those scales, the greater were the scores in all the other scales. These results back up the conclusions from other research (Schwarzwald & Tur-Kaspa, 1998; Stephan, Ybarra & Bachman, 1999; Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Gonzalez, 2008) using the Integrated Threat Theory by Stephan & Stephan (1993, 1996) to examine gender-based behaviours, and attitudes towards immigrant, religious and racial groups. These studies show that perceived endogenous threats are predictors of negative attitudes towards the members of a minority group. Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, this theory has never been used to predict the attitudes towards the Roma group. The findings of the present research have shown that the levels of prejudice are statistically significantly different with respect to professional and sociodemographic factors. In particular, they differ in terms of professional status, level of education, living in areas with high Roma density, parenthood, age and years of professional experience. The research suggests that, among the participants, firstly those who work as municipal employees and, secondly, healthcare staff members, those with a lower educational level, those living in areas with high Roma density, parents, elder people and employees with many years of service, have statistically significantly more negative attitudes and prejudice towards Roma. These factors are identified as predictors of further negative attitudes and prejudice towards Roma. It is also apparent that professionals living in West Attica municipalities with high Roma density, and thus coexisting with these people, are associated with more negative stereotypes, greater intergroup anxiety, more symbolic threats and more negative attitudes towards Roma. This finding is consistent with other studies which have shown that the size of non dominant groups plays a part in and has an impact on prejudice. Larger minority populations, as for example in West Attica where Roma amount to 20 % of the total population, pose a more substantial threat to the dominant group, as intergroup anxiety and threats increase thus eliciting more negative attitudes and prejudice. Various studies (Barany, 1998; Matras, 2000) have shown that the Roma people are more likely to be exposed to discrimination and prejudice in areas with a high Roma density.

Furthermore, the study found that participants with children - and the more children they have - are statistically significantly more likely to exhibit negative stereotypes, greater intergroup anxiety, more symbolic threats and more negative attitudes towards Roma. A possible explanation is that in a child-centred social system, the different parenting habits of the Roma people, which include child labour, child begging, as well as marriage in an early age, are likely to provoke the parents of the dominant majority group. Moreover, the threat posed by the minority group tends to be perceived by parents in greater intensity, since their need to protect both themselves and their children is increased. This finding is consistent with the outcome of several studies examining the attitudes towards other stigmatised groups, such as people with mental illness (Wolf, 1997), which have shown that parents exhibit more negative attitudes and prejudice. Finally, the research found that younger participants have less intergroup anxiety and more positive attitudes towards Roma than elders. This may be because younger people are more likely than their elders to challenge well-established preconceptions, open up to new experiences and show more tolerance. This finding is consistent with the outcome of a number of studies examining the attitudes towards other stigmatised groups, such as people with mental illness (Segal et al., 2005), which have shown that younger people exhibit less negative attitudes and prejudice.

Although the research provides useful insight into understanding the factors related to the study of the negative attitudes of professionals towards Roma, it also involves two key limitations. The first limitation is that the sample of this study comes from an area with a high Roma density which is not indicative of the country as a whole. The generalisability of the findings is thus limited and does not involve healthcare, education and municipal staff at a national level. The second limitation is that the study was conducted through self-administered self-construal questionnaires. Given the fact that this study is examining self-construal with respect to prejudice and negative attitudes, it is possible that whether consciously or unconsciously, professionals participating in the sample were not completely honest, and may have attempted to understate their prejudice, in order to feel more acceptable in moral and social terms.

The study results show most emphatically some of the shortcomings and barriers existing in the Greek social reality in respect of Roma people. The negative attitudes and prejudice held by the public services staff are expected to exacerbate social marginalisation and exclusion as well as discriminations faced by Roma. In the light of the results of this study, social workers should respond to the present-day needs of Roma people through a more active, fair, socially-oriented and reflective social work practice.

The modern definition of the social work profession includes, among others, the concepts of development, social justice, protection of human rights, social cohesion, and social change. In this context, social workers are required to get involved in different levels, by combining various skills and social work methods including multilevel and multi-method approaches (Strier & Binyamin, 2010). Undertaking systematic and targeted interventions and showing particular sensitivity towards all forms of discrimination in order to define them as behaviors and policies violating fundamental human rights lie now at the heart of social work practice. The recognition and understanding of social exclusion and racism, as well as of social, institutional and interpersonal processes creating and reproducing them, is the first step towards a culturally sensitive social work practice. Compared with other patterns of social inequality, social exclusion is identified with the progressive social isolation of the excluded group or community from mainstream society to other social inequality standards (Silver & Miller, 2003). This isolation stems from different processes. In addition to marginalisation caused by multilayered structural deprivation, one of the most common ways in which individuals and groups can be isolated is through stigmatisation processes. Social isolation and exclusion through stigmatisation is achieved by the creation and dissemination of social images that portray the excluded groups as possessing character traits outside of, even threatening to, common views of “normalcy”, as in the case of Roma. These images are deeply embedded in the institutional practices that are precisely the soil in which inequality is nurtured and reproduced. Hence professional social work intervention in terms of human rights and equal social relations should be assertive.

Social workers need to employ anti-oppressive and critical approaches promoting equality and combating inequality and discrimination suffered by Roma people. This is not just a question of countering discrimination, but also of eliminating all socially prevailing prejudiced and stereotyped views about Roma. Hence, high priority should be given to developing systematic interventions that enable a change in the attitudes and the adoption of new perceptions, different ways to interpret various situations and different intervention methods. To this end, social workers in Greece should place a high priority on developing systematic interventions to change the public services professionals’ negative attitudes and lead to the adoption of new perceptions, different interpretation strategies and intervention methods ensuring better results in their everyday work with Roma, and at the same time promoting their social integration. In this framework, and in an effort to develop appropriate interventions to ease the feeling of threat and change anti-Roma attitudes held by public services professionals, it is essential to focus on multicultural interventions, the adoption of multicultural policies and the use of mediators promoting the acceptance of diversity and equal opportunities, and reducing feelings of “outgroup” threat (Hogan & Mallott, 2005; Berry, 2006).

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