Roma and Sinti people in Italy

Helen Dannatt

Introduction

In sociology, the study of racialisation is significant as it is devoted to the processes of ascribing racial identities to different groups. This links to a central idea in symbolic interactionist sociology which includes social constructions and labelling. Therefore in context, the underlying doubt of racism as a real and existing problem rather than social constructions based on people's interpretations will remain throughout this essay. As a result of researching the positions of the Roma and Sinti in Italy, certain themes became apparent in the form of key areas where racism is practiced. Firstly, the role of the government in Italy has arguably played the biggest part towards the disadvantaged position of the Roma and Sinti (Di Pasquale, 2014), particularly in terms of exclusive legislation. What is especially significant here is that the Roma and Sinti are not recognised as a national minority, which deprives them of the positive effects of laws designed for protecting the cultures of minorities. Secondly, marginalization in the areas of employment and housing consistently feature in the literature as a key contributor to inequality. In particular, the ENAR Shadow Report 2012-2013 identifies discrimination against the Roma and Sinti in every stage of employment and describes their 'slavery-like conditions' in sectors such as agriculture (Di Pasquale, 2014). Thirdly, and at a more personal level than the previous areas, xenophobia and violence against Roma and Sinti people is a continuing problem in Italy. For example, the 2008 rampages through Roma camps in Naples is one of many demonstrations of racial hatred. While racism is identifiable in the key areas, they are not mutually exclusive and so will not be addressed in this way. For example, discrimination in employment is considerably a result of the lack of government legislature protecting the Roma and Sinti. Furthermore, there were suspected political motives behind the Naples rampages (Law, 2010). In addition to these examples, attempted explanations for the racism against Roma and Sinti in Italy have been identified. By approaching this in terms of macro, meso and micro factors, a range of external and internal factors are considered (FRA, 2005). Firstly, macro explanations for racism in Italy consider structures such as the economy, for example, how the financial crisis both directly and indirectly hinders the position of the Roma and Sinti amongst other disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, considering a meso explanation creates an understanding of how different contexts define the practices of racism occurring there. For example, why Roma and Sinti appear to suffer a greater degree of exclusion than other minority groups. Lastly, a micro explanation provides answers as to why certain perpetrators of racial hatred act in the way they do. Interestingly, Gadd et al. (2005) suggests that violence actors on the ground of race, are not actually more hostile than non-violent citizens, which vacates a need for more sophisticated explanations such as the rational choice theory. Finally, I will explore the notion of a post-racial world and discuss the direction of Italy's race problem.

The social construction of racism and Roma and Sinti identity

Before exploring the key areas of racism in more detail, it is important to understand the history and development of the Roma and Sinti in Italy to appreciate their positions today. The United Nations (UN) report (2006) states that there are approximately 550,000 Roma and Sinti in Italy, mainly from Romania and former Yugoslavia. However, linking back to the idea of race as a social construct, racial identities are not fixed but instead the product of a range of factors including histories, belongings (Law, 2010) and cultural traditions. The Roma and Sinti are

often identified by their tendency to travel and thus having no national context. However, the ENAR Shadow Report 2012-2013 suggests that 'about 70,000 of the estimated Roma population are Italian Romani citizens that have been living in Italy for more than 600 years' (Di Pasquale, 2014:8) which undermines the sole use of this definition in the context of this study. An alternate attempt of conceptualising Romani identity is to consider their history and therefore identify a common origin and descent such as in the UN Report. According to Vermeersch (2006), Roma in Europe originally descended from a group of people with a common Romani language in a military caste in India. Furthermore, Vermeersch (2006) draws attention to another possible formation of Roma identity which is a biological explanation suggesting that Roma people are genetically related. To expand on this, a discovery in Norwich claimed to identify Romani DNA in an Anglo Saxon skeleton (Morley, 2006). The problem with this method of identifying race in general is that it is heavily deterministic. Some academics argue that scientific racial differences such as those determined by DNA, carry more weight than cultural differences because they are immutable and intrinsic (Carter, 2007). In other words, they are unchanged over time, which gives academics and researchers a solid and consistent definition of race to work with. However, the American Sociological Association (ASA) (2003) insist that racial identity is created by the process of individuals evaluating, ranking and ascribing behaviours to one another based on their presumed race, and so become labelled (Carter, 2007). Thus, their race does not exist external to human thought and interpretation. In contrast to the above, the theory portrayed by the ASA suggests that social definitions of race can change over time which allows a more complex understanding of the study of race. Thus the racism that Roma and Sinti face in Italy is arguably a result of a social construction of their identity and its negative associations.

State institutionalised racism as the main source

Moving on to address arguably the biggest cause of the Roma and Sinti's vulnerability to discrimination (Di Pasquale, 2014), the lack of government action to protect Roma and Sinti's rights is recognised particularly in the UN Human Rights report (2006). The report points to three different forms of institutionalized racism which became apparent during the country visit. Firstly, the report highlights the issue of citizenship when it states that 'among the Roma and Sinti born in Italy, an important number still lack Italian citizenship despite having been born to parents of Italian origin' (Diene, 2007:17). The latter part of this quote links to the previous point regarding Roma and Sinti identity; it is not only categorised by their tendency to travel as many of them do have Italian roots. Field research done by the European Network on Statelessness described the Roma as living in 'legal limbo' (Di Rado, 2013), as without any official recognition of their status (lacking Italian citizenship), their legal rights are inaccessible. The findings of this research revealed the complex and often unachievable process of attaining citizenship, as it often requires Roma and Sinti people to return to their country of origin. Furthermore, the report emphasised the need for stronger interactions between Roma communities and the State administrators in order to combat statelessness more efficiently (Di Rado, 2013). Overall, out of the 239 persons interviewed, 139 possessed no citizenship (Di Rado, 2013). While this research is based on a small sample, the main point was to emphasise the personal desire of Roma and Sinti people to attain citizenship despite being deprived of this by the inaccessible processes emplaced by the Italian government. To sum this up, Di Rado (2013) quotes 'research clearly demonstrated the desire of many to obtain Italian citizenship, not least because Italy is the country where many of those interviewed were born and raised, which many of them have never left'. Therefore, not only does an absent citizenship hinder the legal rights of Roma and Sinti, but the more general exclusion that they suffer as a result of this symbolic act of discrimination can hinder their social positions as they are left wondering what distinguishes them from other 'Italians'.

Secondly, the United Nations Human Rights Report (2006) points out that the Roma and Sinti remain unrecognised as a minority by the State. This is in contrast to other linguistic minorities in Italy which hints at a hierarchy of foreigners, with Roma and Sinti at the bottom. Roma and Sinti are not perceived to fit the definition of a national minority according to authorities, as

they do not live in 'well-defined areas of settlement' (Diene, 2007:17). Therefore, it is due of the authorities' perceptions of what counts as a national minority why the Roma and Sinti lack protection of their language and culture, putting them in more disadvantaged position than other foreigners. In addition to this, another persistent theme across the literature is the apparent ignorance towards Roma and Sinti culture by the state. Both the UN and the ENAR reports refer to a lack of knowledge and information regarding Roma and Sinti's positions, often resulting in published statistics being based on estimates. To summarise this process, the lack of recognition of Roma and Sinti identity by the state leads to a scarce amount of official data regarding their situation. As a result, an ignorance towards their culture is developed along with a subsequent difficulty to establish solutions to their problems. Furthermore, there is no specific law, policy or institution aiming to address the position of the Roma and Sinti as a specific group as well as already established institutions such as the National Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion excluding the Roma and Sinti as a beneficiary group (Diene, 2007). However, more recent research suggests that this is in the process of change. Regardless, the consensus appears to be that the Roma and Sinti are heavily underrepresented in anti-discriminatory laws.

Resulting discrimination in employment and housing

The third point that the UN report draws attention to is the area of employment and housing in terms of the state's role. Roma and Sinti are currently the group facing the heaviest discrimination in these areas. One way of linking the role of the state and employment is the law regarding employment as a prerequisite of residence in Italy. As Di Pasquale (2014) states, 'In Italy, labour is the main channel for entering the country' (p12) which indicates the government's priority of employment status when allowing migrants into Italy. However, repeating the patterns of the citizenship attainment process, securing work is also made difficult and is often unachievable as migrants are expected to attain a job in Italy previous to entering the country. These conditions are regulated under the conceivably unfair Bossi-Fini law, which held the initial aim of regulating the entry of third country nationals. However, because it has become largely concerned with the condition of employment, Emanuele Galossi described it as a 'law on employment rather than a law on migration' (quoted in Di Pasquale, 2014:11). Furthermore, this system is ensuring that those successful migrants become automatically dependent on employers which signifies a limitation of the power possessed by the new migrant workers whilst establishing a hierarchy. Whilst the Roma and Sinti do not count for the whole percentage of migrants, this point remains relevant in attempting to understand general attitudes towards minorities in the labouring process.

Following on from this, the ENAR report emphasises the struggle that the migrants face at every stage of employment in Italy. In relation to accessing employment, the relevant provisions in place can be extremely discriminatory, whether directly or indirectly. UNAR (the Italian Office against Racial Discrimination and the National Contact Point for the social inclusion of Roma and Sinti), stated that in 2012, '62% of reported cases of racial discrimination in the employment sector were related to accessing employment' (UNAR, 2012 quoted in Di Pasquale, 2014:18). This is problematic for the Roma and Sinti as they are denied any chance of exhibiting their skills, solely due to preconceptions made about their identity. An example of an openly exclusive discriminatory approach is in the transport sector. The Royal Decree no. 148 clearly states that 'only Italian citizens can access employment in the companies that manage public transport services' (Di Pasquale, 2014: 13). Also, when specifically considering the Roma and Sinti in access to employment, there is again a visible hierarchy placing them at the bottom. To put this into context, the representative of a Roma organisation, 'Idea Rom' spoke about the extreme cases of Roma being forced to deny their ethnic origins in order to be considered for jobs (Di Pasquale, 2014). Furthermore, in response to Idea Rom confrontation in restaurants and cleaning organisations, employers made comments such as 'send us a nigger rather' (Di Pasquale, 2014:18), which raises the question of what makes Roma and Sinti people specifically less desirable. Similarly, in terms of the health and education sectors, posts are often advertised to those possessing an Italian or EU

citizenship. Linking back to previous points made about Roma and Sinti official identity, denial of citizenship by the state may be a deliberate action to prevent them from accessing employment, thus forcing them to migrate elsewhere. While these actions are clearly discriminatory, employers are able to justify this by pointing out that preferential treatment of nationals over minority groups is legal under EU law.

In addition to discrimination in access to employment, similar conclusions can be drawn when considering processes inside the workplace. There exists a general consensus amongst employers and nationals about racial minorities being inferior and thus deserving less rights. These ideas become embedded as the norm, perhaps due to employers reflecting the discriminatory processes visible at state level. Applying this is context, the ENAR report notes that areas of concern include the non-implementation of safety rules in the workplace and the neglecting of official training for racial minority workers (Di Pasquale, 2014). This not only inflicts danger upon the workers but it adds to the general idea that they are unworthy of protection and basic human rights. Again, this further hinders their social positions as they become isolated from the 'Italian' colleagues who not only possess greater rights, but also the confidence and voice to ensure they are implemented. Research conducted by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) highlights the psychological effects that explicit discrimination in the workplace can have on Roma and Sinti people, amongst other minority groups. In this specific case, a Romani woman working as a cleaner describes how she was harassed by government officials after being wrongly accused of stealing money from the government office. She explains: "…they forced me to take off my shoes, to pull down my panties and take off my bra. Although they did not find the money they kept torturing me saying I am a Romani thief" (quoted in ERRC, 2011). The main point to be drawn from this case is how socially constructed associations and assumptions about certain identities provide a platform for racial hatred to be exercised. Therefore in the above case, the assumption that the Romani cleaner was a thief gave the government officials justification for the act of racial hatred they inflicted upon her. While this analysis is based on one specific case, 'Idea Rom' claim that Romani women are often accused of theft without any proof (Di Pasquale, 2014).

A further point to be drawn about the employment sector is the absence of official contracts. This is again largely due to the fact that many Roma and Sinti workers do not have citizenship and so their vulnerability forces them to accept work in the informal economy. Their vulnerability is then exploited further, as their absence of both citizenship and employment contracts is taken advantage of by employers who often delay payments or do not pay workers at all. The Roma and Sinti are denied relief of the oppression via trade union representatives as their rights to such are violated. Furthermore, where legal action is available, the Roma and Sinti people often resist acting against their employers as they fear dismissal, or in some cases deportation. To summarise, their established vulnerable positions along with their lack of an alternative income source forces them to accept the exploitive conditions they are faced with.

As a result of Roma and Sinti's experiences in employment, many live in deep poverty. This is noticeable when considering their poor housing quality. A Roma representative blamed their housing situation on unemployment levels which he labelled as the major problem, followed by their absent legal status (Diene, 2007). Following the trends of other aspects of Roma and Sinti's lives, their housing situation is informal with camps as the main form of tenure. According to the Special Rapporteur for UN Human Rights, the camps are made up of 'houses' made from 'plastic, aluminium sheets and wood, with earth floors' (Diene, 2007:16). Furthermore, he noted their lack of drinking water and electricity. It is noticeable here how a cycle of poverty is established as low levels of employment amongst the Roma and Sinti results in poor living conditions. This then hinders their employment status further as they are not provided with the essential resources to live healthy lifestyles and thus be fit to work. Furthermore, Roma and Sinti communities experience eviction from their camps without notice which often results in forced vacation from the area of their workplace. To link to this, a Roma representative expressed concern for the Roma and Sinti children who are forced to leave their school as a result of eviction (Diene, 2007). As well as the practical hindrances of living

this way, the consequences of living under difficult hygienic conditions 'nurtured the already existing prejudices against them' (Diene, 2007:16) with people referring to the Roma and Sinti people as 'zingari', meaning dirtiness. Therefore a situation develops whereby discrimination in areas of legislation and employment heavily contribute to the poverty that the Roma and Sinti are forced to live in. The visibilities of this poverty, such as poor housing, provide a platform for further racial hatred to be exercised as the Roma and Sinti become easily distinguished. An observation made by the Special Rapporteur which symbolises the contrast of living standards is the Italian nationals living in regular buildings located around the Sinti camps. Despite this, the Sinti camp residents claim to be well integrated with their non-Sinti neighbours as they shared an origin, language and nationality. Again, this adds to the frustration felt by Roma and Sinti as they wonder what differentiates them so greatly from fellow 'Italians' that it causes them misfortune.

Acts of racial hatred at a personal level

Moving away from structural forms of racism via institutions such as the state and the employment sector, Roma and Sinti people often face xenophobia and racial violence by Italian citizens. This process of racial hatred is visible in the forms of derogatory language, offensive representations and stereotypes, as well as acts of violence (Law, 2010). Following patterns across Europe as a whole, this type of racist crime towards the Roma and Sinti is on the increase. One particular example is the anti-Roma violence that took place in Naples in May 2008, which consisted of the mass forced eviction of Roma from their camps by the use of fire bombs, beatings and attacks (FRA, 2008). This events draws attention to several wider important points such as the strength of popular support for the violence (Law, 2010). This indicates an embedded hierarchy whereby a consensus exists about the Roma's deserved positions. Also, referring back to earlier points, the response of agencies such as the state and criminal justice was limited (Law, 2010). The anti-Roma violence demonstrated in May 2008 included the attempted lynching of a woman and the stabbing of a Romanian labourer on his return from work (FRA, 2008). Furthermore, the prevalent act that gained the most coverage was the assault against 48 Roma families by a group of around 400 locals. They broke into the camps using metal clubs and proceeded to shout abuse at the Roma, overturn cars, attack shacks and caravans using stones and set their homes on fire (FRA, 2008).

The reasoning for these attacks was the apparent attempted kidnap by a 16 year old Roma girl on an Italian woman. By responding in this way, the Italians are relying on the assumption of Roma as a collective group associated with the same values, thus all having the potential to commit crimes such as the one in this case. In other words, the stabbing of a Romanian labourer in response to the Romanian kidnapper is suggesting that the Roma man was responsible for her actions, rather than respecting their individual personalities and circumstances. However, it is unlikely that the violence demonstrated in Naples was in reality a direct response to the act of the Roma girl. It is perhaps more accurate to say that this particular act functioned simply as a justification for already embedded racial hatred to be exercised. Further explanations have linked back to the role of political actors, as the Roma themselves believed there was an economic motive behind the attacks. Their reasoning for this was evidence of the municipal council's Urban Rehabilitation Programme promising a 67 million euro investment in the area if it was available by 4th August (FRA, 2008). Therefore, it is believed that forced eviction methods were put in place in order for construction of the land.

Understanding the motives and explanations for racialisation processes

Particularly when considering racist violence, a complex range of possible motives arise. By linking to all the above areas of racism, explanations can be developed by considering macro, meso and micro factors. Firstly, macro factors direct attention towards societal structures such as the economy and the role of the state. One way that this can be applied in context is the financial crisis in Italy (Di Pasquale, 2014). Direct effects of the crisis have caused an even deeper struggle for the Roma and Sinti communities. Being the most marginalised groups in Italy, they are hit the hardest in terms of wage cuts and increasing risks of redundancy (Di

Pasquale, 2014). More generally, the frustration felt by other Italians during the crisis causes the creation of a scapegoated group as a coping mechanism, resulting in further exclusion of the Roma and Sinti. Therefore, the financial crisis has the potential to hinder both the Roma and Sinti's economic and social positions when using this explanation. Furthermore, a more indirect effect of the financial crisis suggested in the ENAR report is the pre-occupied role of trade unions who divert their attention away from Roma and Sinti in order to focus on the country's crisis which affects a wider group (Di Pasquale, 2014). In terms of sociological theory, Neo-Marxists are likely to adopt this economic explanation as they focus on how the bourgeois-ruled economy causes impoverishment for those at the bottom (Malesevic, 2004).

A further possible macro explanation for racism in Italy which has been considered throughout this study is the role of the state. Again referring to sociological theory, the Elite theory emphasises the impact of those motives and behaviours of the centralised state (Malesevic, 2004). As mentioned in the study, discrimination in the areas of employment and housing as well as the racial violence in Naples can be linked back to motives possessed by the state. Due to the state's highly established position, they possess the power to influence policy in lower levels such as regulations set by employers. Also, they are able to use this power to manipulate facts via propaganda and the media which strongly influence public perceptions. However, this theory heavily relies on the assumption that citizens have no choice or free will in their opinions and actions, but are just pawns of the state. Judging by the extent of xenophobia at personal level towards the Roma and Sinti, additional explanation should be used in conjunction.

In terms of meso explanations, emphasis is placed upon the context to consider what is driving that particular country's racism problem. Furthermore, it attempts to discover what contextual factors result in one particular group being targeted the most. Functionalist sociologists prioritise structural agencies in society when explaining order (Giddens, 1993). To expand, a strong sense of identity within your community is needed for society to run smoothly. This can be applied to the context of this study in two ways. Firstly, mass immigration in Italy since the 1970s has exposed the country to an increased process of multiculturalism (Diene, 2007). This has resulted in disorder and uncertainty about the Italian identity as well as a sense of insecurity regarding their nation. Again, a scapegoated group is created as the Italian nationals seek to blame the migrants and minorities for what they see as disruption to the social cohesion. Secondly, because Roma and Sinti are denied citizenship, their own identity crisis causes disorder and feelings of insecurity. In terms of understanding why the Roma and Sinti are particularly discriminated against, their economically deprived positions and their unhygienic living standards mean they are also discriminated against on the grounds of being poor. They are the most marginalised group in Italy arguably as a result of government policy. Despite this, it makes them even more vulnerable to scapegoating. Furthermore, some employers stated how they preferred to hire minorities who 'look' like Italians, which the Roma and Sinti are not seen to do (Di Pasquale, 2014).

Taking into account micro factors, the focus is on what drives the individual towards carrying out acts of racism. In this way, the understanding of why particular groups are targeted becomes less important. Malesevic (2004) draws attention to the rational choice theory which says that racist violence is purely an act of self-interest. This is often independent to the amount of hostility felt towards the targeted groups as Gadd et al. (2005) suggests that perpetrators of racial violence do not feel greater levels of hostility than those who aren't violent. Although his research was based on a sample in the UK, these ideas can be applied globally. Whilst rational choice theory states that racial violence is an act of self-interest, Law (2010) suggests that it can be influenced by certain environments. For example, 'family environment' where 'racist hostility is socialised and legitimised across generations' (Law, 2010:138). It is then in these environments that the perpetrator personally decides to carry out racist violence. Possible motives include 'emotions' whereby feelings of pleasure and joy from being violent helps mask their own feelings of insecurity and anxiousness. Furthermore,

'bigots' act on prejudices drawn from their immediate social contexts, with reasoning as simple as 'we hate them' (Law, 2010).

As mentioned above, macro explanations for racialisation processes fail to explain why racist violence still happens during times of prosperity and low levels of immigration (FRA, 2005) which is what empowers the use of micro factors. It is likely that an overlapping and linking of the above factors is required to understand motives for racism in Italy.

<u>Italy's position in a post-racial world</u>

Ideas of a post-racial world have particularly emerged after the election of a black president in America, symbolising the end of segregation on the grounds of race. Sociologists have since debated the extent of its validity. Gilroy (2000) agrees with the notion of a post racial world when he argues that as race has no biological basis, race categories should be dismantled in order to extend our understanding of society beyond them. Furthermore, race lacks the complexity to consider the diverse range of identities and multiple social affinities we now have (St Louis, 2002). Therefore, this arguments suggests that we have moved away from a time of ascribing race to groups of people and treating them dependent of this. However, evaluation of the Roma and Sinti's position in Italy concludes that this process is still largely in place there. Goldberg (2008) therefore says that race still exists and functions as a validation of discrimination. Thus suggesting that we need to accept that race still exists in order to address related problems. Lastly, the idea of 'colour-blind' racism suggest that racial inequalities are a result of economic, natural or cultural differences between groups (Hatch, 2008). This helps to understand the continuing racism against Roma and Sinti in Italy as they are not a biologically determined group. However, ones view of a post-racial world depends largely on their view of race in the first place; a social construct or a scientific truth.

<u>Conclusion</u>

The task in this study was to identify the key areas of racial practices against the Roma and Sinti in Italy. By looking at the areas of government policy, the employment and housing sector as well as racial violence, ideas began to emerge regarding the source of racism. As Di Pasquale (2014) argued, the government's role can be identified as the key perpetrator of racialisation processes. When considering the direct effects, the lack of recognition of Roma and Sinti as a national minority along with absence of citizenship automatically hinders their social positions as they are labelled unworthy of basic human rights entitlement. This is reflected in the employment sector as many Roma and Sinti, amongst other minorities, are forced to accept work in the informal economy. Therefore there is often lack of training and official contracts, hindering their access to rights even further as their vulnerable positions are exploited by employers. The economic consequence of this is deep poverty for many Roma and Sinti, visible through their living situations. The camps that they are forced to live in mark a distinction between them and other Italians, creating areas of spatially concentrated disadvantage away from Italian nationals' living space. This, along with the poor condition of such housing exposes them to eviction without notice, and forced eviction by violence such as the incident in Naples. Whilst 'rational choice' theory attempts to explain why perpetrators choose to be violent, this explanation is not enough on its own to understand to complexity of motives. Behind the individual choice of committing a violent act are other influences such as the environment they are in providing justification. Furthermore, the role of the state and the economy largely contribute to the racism in Italy both directly and indirectly. Whilst the government legislature is highly discriminatory towards the Roma and Sinti communities, they also have the power to ideologically influence and create prejudices at a lower level. These explanations are not mutually exclusive and a combination of factors should be used to understand the motives in context. Finally, the validity of the extent of the race problem and its appropriate response are largely determined by whether or not you accept race as a real and existing problem, or as social constructions that seizes to exist external to human interpretation.

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