

“In Spite of” and “Alongside”: Disillusion and Success in Advocacy Communication for the Roma

ADINA SCHNEEWEIS
Oakland University, USA

This article examines the experience of doing advocacy for Roma rights as expressed by activists themselves. Grounded in the case of Romania, the study draws from examples of discrimination, self-interrogation and identity shifts, contextual alliances, and wider European funding processes. The stories shared by Romanian activists reveal discursive practices of disillusion and success. Disappointment emerged in connection to typically large-scale fissures in social, cultural, political, and economic systems, while optimism and drive were evident primarily at a micro level, in the lives of individual people, and in hyperlocalized action. This is not bad news for intervention given that incremental change still counts; yet, the vision of activism and the funding system need to be mindful of such reality and to adjust accordingly.

Keywords: activism, advocacy, ethnicity, interviews, Roma/Gypsy

In activism, as in social change in general, “contradictions and disappointments are intrinsic” (Greenberg, 2014, p. 3) rather than an exception (also see Dimeo, 2016). One of the more recent efforts in mobilization and representation of a downtrodden group, the movement for Roma rights, has seen minute yet consistent success, engaging a considerable number of European nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the work for or on behalf of the Roma. The transnational movement for the rights of the Roma—commonly known as Gypsies and Europe’s largest ethnic minority¹—has been active since the 1990s, building on attempts at organizing dating back to the 1960s and 1970s. It has aimed to raise awareness of discrimination, offer a voice to the marginalized, call for international protection of the Roma’s human and

Adina Schneeweis: schneewe@oakland.edu

Date submitted: 2017–12–18

¹ In response to the diversity of terms used to refer to ethnic communities in various countries—from tribal names (such as the Romanian Căldărași), to group names (such as the British Travellers), to *Gypsy* as an ethnic appellation, to the pejorative *Gypsy* and its linguistic and cultural variants, Romani intellectuals, NGO workers, activists, politicians, scholars, and some ethnic groups themselves have adopted *Roma* as a politically correct term and to build solidarity around the movement for rights. Without suggesting homogeneity of the ethnic minority, I choose *Roma* in this study, the term of choice for the activists interviewed here. I use *Roma* to signify the plural, *Romni* for the feminine singular, *Rom* for the masculine singular, *Romani* for the adjective, and *Romany* for the language (Lemon, 2000)—recognizing at the same time the diversity of spelling and preferences across the various Romani groups.

civil rights, and improve living conditions. Projects of intervention have addressed poverty, education, employment, and health as primary concerns, as well as interethnic relations and discrimination that frequently impede intervention and healing. Advocates, activists, lobbyists, and academics now amass more than 20 years of experience with challenges and successes of working for the Roma. Yet, a report prepared by a collaboration of European NGOs that analyzed the Roma in Romania, for instance, concluded that one of the main obstacles to social inclusion is a public discourse that continues to draw from perceptions and myths, ultimately denying minorities opportunities and possibilities for social transformation (Tarnovschi, Serban, & Preoteasa, 2012). This project adds insight into advocacy for a cause deemed by many as futile, slow, or lacking organization and vision (Vermeersch, 2006), as well as theoretical understanding of activism in an age marked by societal disappointment in leadership and the possibility of change. At the same time as the transnational movement has recorded successful intervention alongside national governments' efforts to address the "Roma problem," reports raise concern over the usefulness and/or futility of NGO work.

In this context of success and futility, the purpose of this study was to examine advocacy communication as it is understood and performed by the workers for Roma rights. Analyses of development communication have historically been grounded in the paradigms of modernization, dependency, participation, or multiplicity (Jacobson, 2016; Schneeweis, 2011; Servaes, 2016), more recently conceiving the groundwork of advocacy as responses to local needs (rather than interceding top-down) and framing intervention into larger discussions about culture. In this research, I focus on the people doing the work of activism, by documenting the narratives of activists themselves as they grapple with representing, and speaking for, the Roma—an inquiry that has not been attempted before, despite growing research on Roma activism, and one that responds to observations in meta-analytical studies of development communication that argue for the need for more "institutional analysis of development agency coordination" (Fair & Shah, 1997, p. 19) and for more attention to development theory (Shah, 2010).

Scholars have examined the notion of success in advocacy influenced by Gamson's (1975) assessment of how a group's goals, demands, organization, tactics, social context, and relationships with other groups (antagonists and allies) affect the ability of that advocating group to establish acceptance and a following. Updates to Gamson's work have added factors such as the degree of permeability of a society to new interests and mobilization during national crises, as well as a group's willingness to accommodate, compromise, and "to seek advantages 'within the system'" (Goldstone, 1980, p. 1027; also see Frey, Dietz, & Kalof, 1992). Correspondingly, a number of difficulties facing activism have been identified—from the broadest issues of social and political context to the most specific details of activist strategy. In regards to the process of becoming visible and efficient in advocacy, others have discussed the challenges of putting new topics, or counterissues, on the media's agenda and, as a desired next step, on the public and policy agenda (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991), and others have noted that communication strategies that emphasize participatory approaches and attention to structural and sustainable social change are more successful than those focused on behavior change, media relations, and advocacy alone (Servaes, 2016).

Regarding the literature on advocacy for the Roma, scholarly work has typically focused on minority politics and mobilization (Barany, 2002; Vermeersch, 2006), funding (Plaut, 2016), advocacy communication practices (Schneeweis, 2015), education (Guarrasi, 2009), identity (Herakova, 2009), or health (Schneeweis, 2011). Vermeersch (2006) found little public and political attention to the transnational

movement for Roma rights, when compared with other social movements, which he linked to the fact that Romani activism "has never been seen as a threat to the stability and the territorial integrity of an existing state" (p. 2), to a general failure to rally the Roma politically, and, relatedly, to what some analysts consider to be a weak group ethnic identity, despite popular perceptions of homogeneity (Barany, 2002). The latter two aspects confirm assessments in the literature that internal politics remain critical to the success of excluded groups (Frey et al., 1992).

Intervention for the Roma in Romania merits attention as an exemplar of patterns and relations in the European Union. Often overlooked by mainstream political discourses, Romania is one of the oldest countries dealing with Roma migration, slavery, poverty, segregation, and discrimination. Romanian activism constitutes a case study within a transnational movement not to be examined in a vacuum, but alongside and as shaped by international political discourses, human rights narratives, transnational economic changes, organizational constraints, ethnic identity, and public manifestations of discrimination. Several of those interviewed here saw the beginnings of mobilization for the Roma in the 1990s, and most have had to adapt to economic and political changes. The work of Romanian advocacy for the Roma is challenging, fraught with obstacles, and has little reward. In the transnational context of slow and difficult mobilization for the Roma, I examine what propels the work of *activism*, a term that serves as an umbrella designation for what the interviewees consider themselves, which I discuss below. Drawing from the frame of the politics of disappointment (Greenberg, 2014), the purpose of this study was to analyze how contradictions of activist practice are managed and understood by the workers for Roma rights.

I examine stories told by 13 Romanian activists and workers for Roma rights, whose narratives serve as reminders of the centrality and significance of the practice of *telling oneself*, of communicating one's story. It is not my intention to glorify, or mark as exemplars, such stories. I sought instead to find what one might learn from people often absent from communication scholarship and the public eye in general, at the same time as their work (reports, lobbying efforts, and intervention efforts) is more frequently scrutinized. As standpoint theory suggests, the knowledge shared is socially situated, subjective, and dependent on social location, at the intersection of power relations, race, gender, ethnicity, class, experiences, challenges, personalities and identities, and organizational dynamics (Hartsock, 1998; Stephenson-Abetz, 2012). As activists work in interethnic spaces, they are further shaped by collective experiences of oppression, exclusion, devaluation, exploitation, and domination (Litwin & O'Brien Hallstein, 2007).

As I examined discursive resources and practices in the workplace, I was mindful of processes of identity formation, self-definition, and belonging, shaped at every turn by several local and distal discourses and by particular conditions and relationships, as scholars of constructionism have shown. Kuhn (2006) writes that identities "require continuing justification to selves and others to sustain a particular self-narrative" (p. 1340). Alongside voluntaristic or autonomous processes of identity construction, self-consciousness is also necessarily a byproduct of culture, institutions, and social hierarchy (Collinson, 2003). Identity can also be understood as a product of normalization, the process of weighing and controlling one's behavior, appearance, and beliefs, which are deeply embedded in hierarchical relations of power (Foucault, 1990). Rowe's (2005) conceptualization of "differential belonging" is also useful in its view of a self that is "radically inclined toward others, toward the communities" (p. 18) to which one belongs; it follows that such a self is at times contradictory, multiple, and shifting (Na'puti, 2016). The examination of Romanian activism

for Roma rights, then, yields reflections of activists' self-perceptions that are telling not only of individual stories, but also of a larger discourse—a collective, cultural, and institutional picture of activism in a country that is one of many implicated in (a hierarchy of) sociopolitical relations in Europe today. In other words, the stories of a few activists can speak to broad issues of activism today. In what follows, I discuss the movement for Roma rights in Romania so as to ground the research locally and in the literature, followed by remarks on the method, and then by the themes and observations drawn from activist narratives.

Contextualizing Advocacy for the Roma in Romania

What I call the "Roma problem" refers to a combination of sociopolitical and economic challenges related to poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, low education levels, poor health, criminality, and segregation (see Kenrick & Puxon, 1972; Schneeweis, 2013a). The Roma in Europe share a past that includes legacies of slavery, the Holocaust/Pogrom, post-Cold War segregation, sterilization, and eugenics (Achim, 2004; Fox, 2001; Kohn, 1996). Today, transnational organizations such as the European Union, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the United Nations, alongside national governments, have implemented policies and projects to overcome discrimination and move toward "integration" and "inclusion." Significant partnerships among NGOs, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, national governments, and other supranational bodies have opened lines of communication and initiated policy changes in the region as a result (Ram, 2011), in part because of international outcries to human rights violations (Bancroft, 2005). At the same time, scholars and NGOs have critiqued Central and Eastern Europe leadership for lack of attention to consequences of policies, especially in a climate made more difficult by NATO and EU enlargement that has created new patterns of competition and collaboration, further contributing to interethnic tension (Blasco, 2011; Nacu, 2011; Ram, 2011; Schneeweis, 2011; Vermeersch, 2006). Advocacy for the Roma has mainly focused on (a) deep-seated racism and human rights violations, likely the least contentious and yet the most profound type of activism; (b) identity and the right to representation; and (c) articulating interests, primarily political (Petrova, 2001).

In Romania, advocacy for the Roma emerged in the 1990s with the Soros-funded Open Society Institute (today, the Foundation for an Open Society). The primary NGO focus has been to improve living conditions overall and eliminate discrimination in the process. Education projects have addressed segregation, school truancy, school supplies, and teaching the Romani language, among others. In the field of health, the program of mediation has been the most prominent, operating successfully since 1996 (Schneeweis, 2013b). Other efforts have addressed human rights violations, housing segregation, political/civic apathy, unemployment, illiteracy, and poverty most generally. Funding for activism has been essential to the life of NGOs, beginning with substantial funding from the Open Society Institute, followed by a range of "integration funds" during Romania's accession years to the European Union, and ending with contemporary "strategic funds," "Norwegian funds," and "European funds" most generally (Plaut, 2016; Schneeweis, 2013a, 2015).

It is somewhat challenging to assess numerically how many Romanian NGOs or activists work on Roma issues. Institutions, committees, interest groups, political parties, and dedicated individuals work for Roma rights, each characterized by different degrees of organization, commitment, agenda, financial backing, or continuity (Schneeweis, 2015). At the same time as it is a fairly small stakes movement, its policies and

approaches to intervention fit into a broader discourse of neoliberalism (Sigona & Trehan, 2009). Others have argued that the creation of the movement itself relies so indispensably on a neoliberal human rights agenda that activism is essentially “an imposition from outside the Romani communities and has been an arena of strategic instrumentalization by elite participants (both Roma and non-Roma)” (Trehan, 2009, p. 54). Given the undeniable popularity of neoliberal values in developing/democratizing Eastern Europe, perhaps the commitment to neoliberalism is logical, given what scholars of social movements have suggested regarding the necessity of framing intervention in socially resonant and historically meaningful ways at the same time as trying to articulate new approaches to politics (Greenberg, 2014).

Method

The study used semistructured, in-depth interviews to learn about the life stories of Romanian workers for Roma rights, a method that allows for an investigation of commonalities and differences in experiences, recognizing at the same time the hierarchies and priorities embedded in relationships and identities (Elmore, 2009). I used critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2004) to make sense of, and contextualize, such experiences in a wider Romanian and European framework, and in their role reproducing and creating a fabric of knowledge (Foucault, 1990).

Participants

Narratives about Roma activism were sought via in-depth interviews with 13 Romanian activists, intellectuals, scholars, and social workers, selected using snowball sampling. Staff members of NGOs found online were contacted and asked to recommend other activists in their professional network. The pool included seven Roma, five Romanians (of which one had a Roma grandparent), and one Hungarian, all self-identified as such. Five were women and eight were men; seven were in their 30s, five were in their 40s, and one was in his 50s. All but one of the 13 lived either in the capital or in another metropolitan city. All interviewees were employed by NGOs at the time of the interviews, with the exception of three participants—one, a state employee who saw her early career as that of an activist; one an academic with activist work alongside his formal university position; and a third, a staff member of a foreign embassy. The interviewees had worked on Roma issues for an average of 14 years (between 9 and 25 years of experience), and some had additional background in NGO work and other social justice activism. All interviewees had worked in a variety of NGO positions, culminating for five of them in leadership roles. In this article, all names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Alongside the study participants, I must acknowledge my positioning as insider and outsider among the activists. With all, I shared an upward mobility and the experience of growing up in Romania. With others, I shared academic training and my ethnic background, and with others, we related on the basis of a joint commitment to Roma rights. To all, I was also an outsider—a communication scholar from the United States, whom they had all just met for the purpose of the research. I recognize that my formation as a critical scholar, shaped by Western knowledge and a certain view of “the return of ‘natives’” to study homeland societies (Parameswaran, 2001, p. 72), ultimately influenced the direction of the interviews. Relatedly, I have been conscious of the practice of articulating “original” voices and of speaking for the *other*, and have cautiously proceeded.

Procedure

The interviews examined for this study were conducted since 2011, in person or via Skype, lasting on average 95 minutes. The interviews were approached as "conversations with a purpose" (Bingham & Moore, 1959, quoted in Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 172), beginning with a chronology of one's trajectory in working for Roma rights, yet in a flexible format to prioritize participants' narration of their experiences. Most participants independently touched on identity, often in response to questions about their reasons for beginning to work for Roma rights. Aside from my preplanned guidance, the conversations moved in the direction of the topics that the participants wanted to discuss, often with little prompting.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed (and, where relevant for the study, verified for factual information). Treating the transcripts as texts—fluid, ideological social practices that are *meaningful*, not accidental (Fairclough, 2004; Hall, 1997)—they were read to gain familiarity with the topics addressed, and then with attention to tone, emphasis, repetition, and linguistic structures (vocabulary, metaphors, and descriptions). The analysis sought to illuminate the little (d) discourses that shape, and change with, the big (D) Discourse of advocacy for the Roma in Europe, a Discourse that shapes beliefs and behavior (Fairclough, 1993; Gee, 1996; Rogers, 2002). At this stage, I compared interview texts with each other in an attempt to identify common stories and also to seek out the standpoints of multiple voices, experiences, and social locations. Guiding questions in the analysis included the following: How are the Roma spoken about? How do activists talk about themselves and their work? How do they talk about the movement for Roma rights in Romania? What challenges and successes do activists talk about? As connections and patterns surfaced from activists' narratives, so did alliances, commitments, challenges, and identity construction, which I then interpreted in relation to other discourses—in other words, *contextually*, in their historical, political, and social circumstances and in their inevitable relation to other forms of representation (Fairclough, 2004; Saukko, 2003). In what follows, I include extensive quotations² to ensure accurate representation of the activists' words.

Findings

The stories shared by Romanian activists reveal discursive practices of disillusion and success, which shape and define various aspects of activism. Narratives about NGO work nearly always brought up a challenge, and vice versa. Sources of disillusion included state policies, international funding, and broad political forces that shape intervention. Discrimination against the Roma and internalized stigma were discussed as obstacles to activism. The interviewees frequently brought up concerns over the effectiveness and efficiency of intervention in Romania. By the same token, the struggles narrated were nearly always accompanied by examples of successful intervention, change, empowerment, and growth. The dance between the two emotions—disillusion and positivity—was important to examine in its role in what compels activism in contemporary Romania. Before I turn to explicate each discursive practice, I turn first to a discussion of definitions and identity of Romanian "activism" today, to contextualize who the workers for Roma rights are in their self-perceived roles.

² All the translations from Romanian into English are the author's.

Activism as Calling

Much of the conversations with Romanian activists revolved around the purpose of their work, the meaning of their activism, and their self-definitions—indicative of a desire for reflection and processing about (the meaning of) “activism.” Attempting to generalize on such topics, however, would mean lumping the life stories in categories stripped of individualized journeys. I offer the two broad ways in which the term *activism* was used and explained by the interviewees, with the understanding that each explanation rests on a rich context, some of it societal and cultural, and some deeply personal. Whereas some interviewees adopted the term *activist*³ and others denied it emphatically, it emerged that the differences lay with the definition of activism. To illustrate, some participants unequivocally called themselves activists and embraced being an activist, which they defined in ways such as

Sabin: Each of us is an activist. The activist must give a lot to those around. The activist must be involved, search solutions . . . As an activist, you must act as an agent of change, to be a catalyst for change, to fight, to move.

Mia: [I continue this work] because I believe in what I do . . . advocacy is a Don Quixote type of thing, perpetually. But you must continue to believe, otherwise there is no chance to change anything.

Others rejected being called an activist, and preferred related terms such as worker for rights, social justice worker, intellectual, or scholar. In their explanations, *activism* meant a temporary passion or participating in protests, indicative of a localized political discourse and history in Romania. For example, a recent study (Miliția Spirituală, 2011) surveying Romanian youth found *activism* to mean “volunteering, charity activities and aid for distressed or disadvantaged social groups” (p. 16), and also to be associated with solidarity and courage, often expressed as protest activities. Yet, in clarifying the contribution of the work, the same vision of activism emerged as those articulated by the first group who claimed the term *activist*. Petru, for instance, said, “I am not an activist, absolutely not. I am a social worker . . . My focus is on changing the system,” mirroring Sabin’s take above. Marian also said,

We try to do our job the best that we can . . . We are not activists. We do what we do with belief . . . We are called “together”⁴ because we believe in certain principles that are valid for Roma and for you as a woman, and for another who is gay, and for you who is a religious minority. First, you have to be active, don’t expect others to do things . . . Second, what you don’t like, don’t do it to another. “Together” means more than Roma.

Petru’s or Marian’s self-identifications are strikingly similar to the same dedication to make a difference, to bring about change that the former group expressed.⁵ Marian’s words are also reminiscent of religious

³ The term *advocate* does not have a direct translation into Romanian, and as such is not used locally.

⁴ Marian works for an NGO called “Agentia Impreuna,” translated as “The Together Agency.”

⁵ Purposes of advocacy typically include representing and giving voice to those excluded, giving or increasing the power of certain groups, responding to needs, offering humanitarian relief, working toward

studies that speak of a "meaning-giving drive" (Novak, 2009, p. 3) and of the literature on spirituality and organizational leadership that suggests the necessity of an intrinsic motivation reliant on values, beliefs, and attitudes, in order to lead. If the reasons for spiritual leadership incorporate "vision, hope/faith and altruistic love" (Markow & Klenke, 2005, p. 9), so does activism to people like Marian or Sabin, or Paul, who define their work with comparable fervor. Sabin, for one, was someone who joined an NGO out of his undergraduate studies in social work and was given responsibilities to work on Roma projects; in his words, he felt "responsible" to continue the work.

For Marian, the fact that there are large sums of money involved in intervention for Roma is the reason why he cannot define himself as an activist: "I am not an activist . . . [W]e are very well paid for what we do; and I don't believe in the type of activism that transforms itself into a job."

Some hesitation also emerged in expressing one's identity, how activists have been perceived by others, and in turn how they reflect on their own belonging to a group. A Romani activist reflected,

What makes me Roma? I dress like a Romanian, I married a Romanian, I don't speak Romany, I live in an apartment building. What am I? . . . Some will say a Roma is Protestant and Caldarari.⁶ Others say I have to speak the language . . . I don't. What am I? What is my need? Do I have other needs? Roma have the same needs as everyone else. (Marian)

Ileana, a Romanian in her 50s who has worked for Roma activism for 25 years, said she is frequently taken to be Roma ("many consider me one of them"), and a younger Romni participant shared her hesitation in how to view herself: "The Roma don't consider me Roma, like them, and to Romanians I will always be of Romani ethnicity. Then where am I?" Such musings on identity and belonging—some certain, some contradictory, some in progress—suggest a hybridity reminiscent of what it means to be in the midst of change, of a process (Arthur, 2011; Schneeweis, 2013b).

Disillusion

Typical expressions of disillusion centered on the difficulty of the job and of the moment in Romanian history, by and large attributed to lack of support from the political system. In straightforward terms, activists expressed challenges of activism: "Failures are at every step" (Mia); "It's not easy; it's not easy. And every day, you run into obstacles . . . I think it's very difficult" (Carina); "It's tough right now" (Barbu); "Unfortunately, a lot remains on paper . . . Of course, there is a lot of work, a lot of work left. We've been working for 20 years, and if you look at it all, maybe we need 200 more years [laughs]" (Rodica). In Carina's words, some local authorities "have no interest [to finance and continue service brought into a community by an NGO]. They don't even try to get involved in such projects." Daniel also clearly pointed to the need for systemic change—within society and within the movement:

reconstruction and stabilization, affecting policy change, and improving governance (Search for Common Ground, n.d.; Servaes & Malikhao, 2012).

⁶ Caldarari are a group or tribe found in Eastern Europe.

Doing advocacy in Romania is hard. Romanians don't really know how to, they're not organized or many times they are not strategic, not planned. They have some success, good ideas, interesting projects, but they're not put in a big picture, to see what to do short term and long term, let's establish milestones, what happens if we reach them, if we don't, then what, to anticipate scenarios; no one does it like that.

Daniel identified the need for a vision of activism that encompasses funding and localized projects of intervention, and Rodica recognized the long-term need for activist intervention because there have been, in her words, "punctual changes, with the people we work with. But, at the community level, I couldn't say that a project we've done for three years has entirely changed it or its social status."

Another significant source of disappointment was funding (European, "strategic" funds) and its impact on the scope, type, and length of intervention. For instance, in Sabin's words, "People end up going crazy for the very good salaries from structural funds, everyone is an expert." Mia, an activist working for a large NGO in the capital for nearly 20 years, reflected on the system of funding, yet in a broader perspective, at international and supranational levels:

European funds . . . are for developing the poorest areas, but evidence shows that they can't be accessed by these communities. To access European funds, you need to have acquaintances, to have money, to have relations, you need a certain capital. *European money is not for the poor; European money is for the rich* . . . [emphasis added]. European money doesn't lead to uniform development, but can lead to the growth of differences between rich and poor communities.

In another instance, Mia added, "Sometimes it's exhausting, and you want to pick up your toys and go home." It is interesting to note the activists' hesitations about, and outright criticism of, European-level funds, given that these were created to introduce some coordination of intervention across Europe and in countries with large Roma minority groups (Plaut, 2016). The challenges identified in the study include a range of funding issues, including, to name a few, the size of the grants available for intervention in Romania and/or on Roma issues, the temporary nature of intervention (mostly short- and medium-term projects), and the infrastructure involved in the funding process (the process of application and review of grants and program efficacy).

A substantive concern lies with the unique characteristics and features of anti-Roma sentiments—in Romania and in Europe most generally—which complicate activism at a much deeper level. As such, a number of participants commented on racism and discrimination. After 20 years of work in the field, Sabin noted, "Solidarity between people is still a beautiful story." Mia said, "It's not really accurate to speak of 'community' in Romania. Everyone lives for their own family, individually. Social solidarity suffers very much. And not having social solidarity is reflected in where we live and how we live." Paul's powerful narrative is telling of structural racism. He shared the story of his grandmother who married an officer in the army, only to find out after the war ended and after the wedding that she had married a Rom; she was unwelcome in the community, faced with domestic violence and abuse, and deeply judged by her own family, Paul's grandmother fled the Roma village and tried to kill herself and her unborn son; she survived, as did her son, Paul's father, and she remarried a Romanian doctor, with whom she had two daughters that she loved and

cherished; Paul's father grew up always rejected, unwanted, and was only told about his true birth-father at his mother's deathbed, when she disowned him; in Paul's words, his father was born and raised as "the Gypsy's child," as an abortion. Paul shared the narrative to explain his path to choose the type of research, teaching, and activism toward equality that he does, but also to confess his struggle to do activism for the Roma, as he has not yet settled on his own, newly discovered relationship to the ethnic minority. Whereas other activists, like Barbu, saw challenges to mean that he is doing his job right—"It's tough right now," yet "it's normal to be depressed as an activist . . . This means you're a real activist; if you didn't have [depression], then maybe you're just a clerk"—Paul reframed the challenges of activism to also signify resistance to intervention in a community that may not want it, in a group that may not want change or to live "enrolled in a structured society" (Paul). The particular challenges of societal opposition, inflexibility, or lack of interest in social justice issues (as they relate to the rights of the Roma) must be weighed as significant factors affecting (and, I argue, slowing down) the work for mobilization (see Frey et al., 1992; Goldstone, 1980).

Success

Whereas challenges in activism were primarily located at the macro level—attributed broadly to state intervention, international funding, and systemic discrimination—examples of successful intervention were hyperlocalized, at the individual level. As Petru put it, "I didn't set out to change the community. I set out to change things for children." All participants emphasized progress in Romanian Roma communities. For example, Mia said, "It's better than in the '90s." Several emphasized notable changes in individuals affected by NGO programs: Carina, Daniel, Mia, and Rodica spoke of college graduates, health mediators, experts working for city halls; Barbu, Rodica, and Ileana all noted former interns who now have their own organizations, and do work for the Roma nationally and internationally. Codrin praised the success his organization has achieved in building relationships with authorities and in decreasing truancy rates.

Nearly all spoke emphatically about what they deem as successful. In Pavel's words, "If you look in the morning, you can see a line of kids, some Roma, some not Roma, all walking to school with their backpacks on." To Petru, a positive intervention outcome was the building of a public park following the organizing of a group of Roma mothers, a benefit to "the whole community." To elaborate on the meaning of success, Sabin explained, "You manage to change some people . . . From my point of view, this is the most beautiful type of success, which maybe may not be understood by a financier, but it does happen." Ileana reflected,

[After a year-long project ended, the participants in the project said to me,] "we haven't learned in 25 years what we've learned in this year-long program." When you get feedback like that, what more do you need? . . . If we've managed to change one person, to make him stronger in his knowledge and life experience, I don't believe those things didn't affect all sorts of other things in his life; I don't think he didn't learn to work more efficiently, to communicate more efficiently, or to plan better certain activities, or to make better reports.

To Ileana, success was a matter of impressing a certain degree of professionalism on the work for the Roma, but also teaching professionalism: "We showed them in fact how to approach a problem, how to look for solutions, how to plan to solve them." She added, "Here is where we've been successful: We didn't treat people superficially, and we cared about respecting the work." From such definitions, a vision of successful intervention for Roma rights in Romania emerged, and it is one that changed people, small pieces of the system. Or, in another sense, intervention has been most impactful at a hyperlocal level for the time being.

The activists interviewed all spoke about both success and disillusion; one discursive pattern invoked the other. For instance, Mia commented on the futility of research in the context of her NGO and how challenging it is to bring solutions to governmental officials, only to be met with disinterest. As she said, "Many times they don't listen to your solutions," Mia immediately added, "In advocacy, you must try." In spite of the sober assessment of how neoliberal patterns of funding function (Sigona & Trehan, 2009), Mia returned many times to the necessity to keep trying, to be optimistic. Likewise, Barbu, another activist with more than two decades of experience, connected the difficulties facing the Roma living in poverty with those facing any person living in poverty; in his assessment, "The country is not doing well—the whole population, not just the Roma." Such comments add a layer of understanding of Romanian activism that is about governmental and societal structures that must change. At the same time, they echo what others have noted in activism in Egypt, for instance (Dimeo, 2016), and in postcommunist contexts most generally, where disillusion and euphoria have gone hand-in-hand in all aspects of life (Galasińska, 2010, p. 191).

Conclusion

Learning from the people doing the work of activism, this study contributes to communication for development and advocacy by highlighting a capital (D) Discourse of advocacy defined by challenge and disillusion on one hand—attributed mostly to large-scale, national, and supranational fissures in the social, cultural, political, and economic systems, and to the structure of the movement itself—and drive and success on the other. The latter indicates a continual persistence to move forward, a dedication that is passion-like, meaning-giving, and propelled primarily by micro-level successes, noted in the lives of individual people and in hyperlocalized action. The findings move forward the scholarly understanding of activism in an age marked by societal disappointment in political leadership and the possibility of change by illuminating patterns that speak to what could change in Romanian activism for the Roma. Returning to Shah's (2010) meta-analysis of development communication research, which concluded that, since the mid-1980s, studies most frequently demanded more attention to development theory, I argue that this study contributes to a view of development that must appreciate microchange, as it refines work toward change at the macro level. Furthermore, the results build on Shah's analysis that research has more frequently and increasingly found mentions of positive impact of development communication in the period 1987–2006. The emphasis on micro-level change does not fit with the predominant trend in the last 20 years of research that does not often conclude with positive impacts on individuals, even though this was more common in the 1958–1986 period (Shah, 2010).

This study has implications for scholars of discourse and communication for development as well. It reinforces the need for attention to the minute and the specific, at the very same time as it focuses on context. As I respond here to critical scholars' call to problematize communication for marginalized groups

(e.g., Parameswaran, 2001), I conclude by reiterating a complexity and complication embedded in Discourse in the struggle for representation and power. One European activist's statements from 2001 stand true for advocacy a decade and a half later (despite a great deal of variance among countries' specific needs and contexts):

Whoever represents the Roma, exerts power inside the Romani community and therefore also in the outside world, and vice versa. Whoever controls the relationships between Romani communities and majority institutions will be in a position to influence developments inside the movement. (Petrova, 2001, para. 5)

The strain to control the manner of intervention has evolved today to be so deeply guided by the international donor system and because it is challenging to activists and a source of disillusion could suggest a desire for more control in representation on the part of NGO workers. The expression of disillusion itself, as a discursive act, contributes to the hierarchy of relations of power in society (also see Guillem & Toulou, 2018), and, as such, it emerges as a somewhat necessary part of the process of advocacy and of the struggle for representational power, at the same time as such a challenge within the system of work for the Roma may explain difficulties of mobilization (see Frey et al., 1992). At the same time as activists' frustrations with international donors and with the uncertainty of the political landscape, their hesitation about the efficacy of advocacy work, and their fear of the futility of their efforts all point to issues that need attention, the very enactment (or performance) of disillusion constitutes a discursive tool in the struggle for representation. Future analyses of communication for advocacy and development must continue to contextualize processes, patterns, and experiences thoroughly in the process of making sense of them.

The findings are also relevant to communication research on advocacy, as it has found that a movement with broader demands (vs. with a single-issue focus) seems to be quite a heavy burden for activism in contemporary Europe, still affected by democratization processes and evolving/changing transnational financial interests. Somewhat different from earlier observations (see Servaes, 2016), this study found that Romanian activists for the Roma noted effective communication strategies for behavior change in microcontexts, where interpersonal relationships strengthen interethnic bonds and change (a participatory approach to communication for development) and more challenges in regards to structural and systemic issues. Yet, Servaes (2016) argues,

Sustainable social change can only be achieved in combination with and incorporating aspects of the wider environment that influences (and constrains) structural and sustainable change. These aspects include: structural and conjunctural factors (e.g., history, migration, conflicts), policy and legislation, service provision, education systems, institutional and organizational factors (e.g., bureaucracy, corruption), cultural factors (e.g., religion, norms, and values), sociodemographic factors (e.g., ethnicity, class), sociopolitical factors, socioeconomic factors, and the physical environment. (p. 704)

Likewise, this study finds that the communication strategies of a smaller scale social justice project must (continue to) give substantive consideration to creating and nurturing sustainable change at the level of the system, despite and alongside the challenges of rendering such strategies successful.

Finally, the findings of this study are not necessarily bad news for intervention given that incremental change is still change; yet, the vision of activism and, likely, its relationship to funding actors need to be mindful of such outcomes and adjust accordingly. In the context of transnational work for Roma rights, the stories of Romanian activists advance understanding of advocacy for a community not yet working together or without one single identity (also see Petrova, 2001). One of the strengths of the stories shared is that they bring forth both the dark and the light times of activism, and, in the process of sharing their journeys in the course of interethnic work, the identities of Romanian activists emerge, corresponding neither to the Romanian national community, nor to the international NGO world alone, nor to the Roma community exclusively, nor to a localized experience. The enactment of activist identities seems to rely on inner drive, passion, and commitment, and to respond to international and national institutions, while articulating at the same time a challenge to the donor system and the neoliberal logic (i.e., imposing, strategic activism from the outside; see Trehan, 2009). Working on Roma issues emerges as a juggling act, wearing both hats at the same time—that of the optimist, the believer, the visionary, and that of the disconcerted, the disillusioned, the disappointed. Activism must take place in spite of everyday challenges and lack of societal and state support and alongside such difficulties, all at the same time. My assessment is that the activists' confidence and motivation depend on uncertainty and disillusion. Workers for Roma rights know they have to keep refining and adapting their approaches to a variety of political, economic, social, and cultural factors; the alternative is a painful future. The landscape in which activism must operate forces individual activists to stand their ground and to continue to adapt at the same time. The important testimonies laid out here—stories of inclusion, integration, and interethnic partnerships that have moved communities forward—testify to a project of development that works well, albeit slowly, incrementally, and hyperlocally, and that must also continue to tackle larger systemic racial-ethnic, normative, sociocultural, and structural factors if it hopes to affect sustainable social change in a "globalized," digitized, and unionized Europe, whose future remains unclear.

References

- Achim, V. (2004). *The Roma in Romanian history*. Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Press.
- Arthur, P. (Ed.). (2011). *Identities in transition: Challenges for transitional justice in divided societies*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Bancroft, A. (2005). *Roma and Gypsy—Travellers in Europe: Modernity, race, space and exclusion*. Burlington, NJ: Ashgate.
- Barany, Z. (2002). *The East European Gypsies: Regime change, marginality, and ethnopolitics*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Blasco, P. G. Y. (2011). Agata's story: Singular lives and the reach of the "Gitano law." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 17, 445–461.
- Collinson, D. L. (2003). Identities and insecurities: Selves at work. *Organization*, 10(3), 527–547.

- Dimeo, D. F. (2016). *Committed to disillusion: Activist writers in Egypt in the 1960s–1980s*. Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Elmore, C. (2009). Turning points and turnover among female journalists: Communicating resistance and repression. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 32(2), 232–254.
- Fair, J. E., & Shah, H. (1997). Continuities and discontinuities in communication and development research since 1958. *Journal of International Communication*, 4(2), 3–23.
- Fairclough, N. (1993). Critical discourse analysis and the marketization of public discourse: The universities. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 133–168.
- Fairclough, N. (2004). *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality: An introduction* (Vol. 1). New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Fox, J. (2001). Patterns of discrimination, grievances and political activity among Europe's Roma: A cross-sectional analysis. *Journal of Ethno-Politics and Minority Issues in Europe*, (2). Retrieved from <http://www.ecmi.de/jemie/download/Focus11-2001Fox.pdf>
- Frey, R. S., Dietz, T., & Kalof, L. (1992). Characteristics of successful American protest groups: Another look at Gamson's *Strategy of Social Protest*. *American Journal of Sociology*, 98(2), 368–387.
- Galasińska, A. (2010). It's all about work. In A. Galasińska & D. Galasiński (Eds.), *The post-communist condition: Public and private discourses of transformation* (pp. 191–209). Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Gamson, W. A. (1975). *The strategy of social protest*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press.
- Gee, J. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London, UK: Falmer Press.
- Goldstone, J. A. (1980). The weakness of organization: A new look at Gamson's *The Strategy of Social Protest*. *American Journal of Sociology*, 85(5), 1017–1042.
- Greenberg, J. (2014). *After the revolution: Youth, democracy, and the politics of disappointment in Serbia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Guarrasi, I. (2009). *Words apart: Patterns of communication and the schooling of Roma children in Slovakia* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Long Beach, CA: California State University, Long Beach.

- Guillem, S. M., & Toula, C. M. (2018). Critical discourse studies and/in communication: Theories, methodologies, and pedagogies at the intersections. *Review of Communication, 18*(3), 140–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2018.1480793>
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation & the media*. Media Education Foundation Transcript. Produced and directed by S. Jhally.
- Hartsock, N. (1998). Standpoint theory for the next century. *Women and Politics, 18*(3), 93–101.
- Herakova, L. L. (2009). Identity, communication, inclusion: The Roma and (new) Europe. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, 2*(4), 279–297.
- Jacobson, T. L. (2016). Amartya Sen's capabilities approach and communication for development and social change. *Journal of Communication, 66*, 789–810.
- Kenrick, D., & Puxon, G. (1972). *The destiny of Europe's Gypsies*. London, UK: Sussex University Press.
- Kohn, M. (1996). *The race gallery: The return of racial science*. London, UK: Vintage.
- Kuhn, T. (2006). A "demented work ethic" and a "lifestyle firm": Discourse, identity, and workplace time commitments. *Organization Studies, 27*(9), 1339–1358.
- Lemon, A. (2000). *Between two fires: Gypsy performance and Romani memory from Pushkin to postsocialism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Litwin, A. H., & O'Brien Hallstein, L. (2007). Shadows and silences: How women's positioning and unspoken friendship rules in organizational settings cultivate difficulties among some women at work. *Women's Studies in Communication, 30*(1), 111–142.
- Markow, F., & Klenke, K. (2005). The effects of personal meaning and calling on organizational commitment: An empirical investigation of spiritual leadership. *The International Journal of Organizational Analysis, 13*(1), 8–27.
- Mathes, R., & Pfetsch, B. (1991). The role of alternative press in the agenda-building process: Spill-over effects and media opinion leadership. *European Journal of Communication, 6*, 33–62.
- Miliția Spirituală. (2011). *Civic activism and attitudes towards protest among young people in Romania*. Retrieved from <http://www.ceetrust.org/article/691/>

- Nacu, A. (2011). The politics of Roma migration: Framing identity struggles among Romanian and Bulgarian Roma in the Paris region. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37(1), 135–150.
- Na'Puti, T. R. (2016). From Guahan and back: Navigating a "both/neither" analytic for rhetorical field methods. In S. L. McKinnon, R. Asen, K. R. Chavez, & R. G. Howard (Eds.), *Text + field: Innovations in rhetorical method* (pp. 57–71). University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Novak, M. (2009). *Ascent of the mountain, flight of the dove: An invitation to religious studies*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Parameswaran, R. (2001). Feminist media ethnography in India: Exploring power, gender, and culture in the field. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(1), 69–103.
- Petrova, D. (2001). *The Romani movement: What shape, what direction?* Retrieved from <http://www.errc.org/article/the-romani-movement-what-shape-what-direction/1292>
- Plaut, S. (2016). Follow the money: International donors, external homelands and their effect on Romani media and advocacy. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40, 1058–1076.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1267377>
- Ram, M. H. (2011). Roma advocacy and EU conditionality: Not one without the other? *Comparative European Politics*, 9, 217–241.
- Rogers, R. (2002). Between contexts: A critical discourse analysis of family literacy, discursive practices, and literate subjectivities. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37(3), 248–277.
- Rowe, A. C. (2005). Be longing: Toward a feminist politics of relation. *NWSA Journal*, 17(2), 15–46.
- Saukko, P. (2003). *Doing research in cultural studies: An introduction to classical and new methodological approaches*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Schneeweis, A. (2011). Constructing the Roma audience: Public health communication and intervention in contemporary Romania. *Critical Public Health*, 21(3), 297–312.
[doi:10.1080/09581596.2010.508102](https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2010.508102)
- Schneeweis, A. (2013a). Advocacy representation and resistance: Two NGOs' efforts to communicate the movement for Roma rights, 1990–2006. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 37(2), 149–170.
- Schneeweis, A. (2013b). Empowered leaders and alone in community: Stories of Romanian Roma health mediators. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 36(2), 167–188.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2013.794755>

- Schneeweis, A. (2015). Communicating the victim: Nongovernmental organizations advocacy discourses for Roma rights. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 8(2), 235–253.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12077>
- Search for Common Ground. (n.d.). Communication for peacebuilding: Practices, trends and challenges. Retrieved from <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/communication-for-peacebuilding-practices-trends-challenges.pdf>
- Servaes, J. (2016). How “sustainable” is development communication research? *International Communication Gazette*, 78(7), 701–710.
- Servaes, J., & Malikhao, P. (2012). Advocacy communication for peacebuilding. *Development in Practice*, 22(2), 229–243.
- Shah, H. (2010). Meta-research of development communication studies, 1997–2006. *Glocal Times*, 15, 1–21.
- Sigona, N., & Trehan, N. (2009). Introduction: Romani politics in neoliberal Europe. In N. Sigona & N. Trehan (Eds.), *Romani politics in contemporary Europe: Poverty, ethnic mobilization, and the neoliberal order* (pp. 1–20). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stephenson-Abetz, J. (2012). Everyday activism as a dialogic practice: Narratives of feminist daughters. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 35(1), 96–117.
- Tarnovschi, D., Serban, M., & Preoteasa, A. M. (2012). *Situatia romilor în România: Între incluziune sociala și migrație* [Roma situation in Romania: Between social inclusion and migration]. Constanta, Romania: Editura Dobrogea.
- Trehan, N. (2009). The Romani subaltern within neoliberal European civil society: NGOization of human rights and silent voices. In N. Sigona & N. Trehan (Eds.), *Romani politics in contemporary Europe: Poverty, ethnic mobilization, and the neoliberal order* (pp. 51–71). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vermeersch, P. (2006). *The Romani movement: Minority politics and ethnic mobilization in contemporary Central Europe*. Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books.