

# Parental Ethnotheories in Children's Digital and Media Lives

## *The Case of Romanipen*

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### Abstract

The article discusses the possible relevance and value of parents' cultural beliefs, and the research on them, to parental mediation and digital parenting theory and practice. It draws upon a small-scale ethnographic research conducted with seven Czech Roma families, which phenomenologically focused on young children's media experience and learning. The possible role of parental ethnotheories and cultural experiences in general, and of romanipen in particular, in parental mediation and digital parenting emerged subsequently from the interviews with the children's mothers. This article draws upon three family narratives that are used to illustrate how research into parental ethnotheories could possibly lead to an alternative interpretation of existing, and the construction of new, knowledge about parental mediation approaches, motivations and forms. Reflecting the participating Roma families' lived experience, parental mediation and digital parenting are not differentiated in this article.

**Keywords:** parental ethnotheories, parental mediation, Roma, children, media experience, learning

### Introduction

The Romani people represent Europe's largest minority (European Commission, 2016), yet the rights of many Romanis are being constantly violated by distinct parties directly and indirectly involved in their lives. For example, Czech policy, educational as well as public, faces criticism for a lack of knowledge and acknowledgement of Roma children's upbringing and lived experiences, often seen as inconsistent with the majority population (Kaleja, 2011). According to The Open Society Foundation's

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report *No Data – No Progress* (2010), developed under the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015), the indirect violation is mainly caused by insufficient knowledge of the “Roma world”. The argument is that such knowledge is “necessary for breaking the vicious circle of ignorance and prejudice: ignorance generates prejudices, and prejudices foster ignorance” (National Office on Anti-Racial Discriminations, 2011: 10). Even though the concept of the “Roma world” is ambiguous and reinforces the feeling of alienation and otherness, we should not underestimate the importance of research seeking better knowledge and greater understanding.

This article contributes, although only initially and partially, to such understanding by discussing Roma children’s upbringing in general, and in the context of media and digital technology in particular, because nowadays these “underpin and overarch the experiences and expressions of everyday life” (Deuze, 2011: 137). Up to now, the role of media and digital technology in Roma children’s upbringing and lived experiences, and vice versa, have been mostly neglected by research. We address this gap by drawing upon a qualitative study conducted with Roma families living in the Czech Republic, which was funded by the Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM) award by the ISCH COST Action IS1410: The digital literacy and multimodal practices of young children (DigiLitEY). The aim of the project was to explore the Czech Roma children’s media experience and learning across home and institutional settings. Children’s upbringing was not originally part of the research focus; the need for a greater understanding of this aspect emerged from the field research. Whereas we discuss the findings focused on the Czech Roma children’s media experience and learning elsewhere (Zezulková, 2016), the focus here is parental ethnotheories and their role in parental mediation research, theory and practice.

## Parental ethnotheories and romanipen

Parental mediation is mostly understood as conscious parental strategies and actions aiming at maximising the opportunities and minimising the risks related to children’s media consumption and production (Schaan & Melzer, 2015), but we also include “natural” and possibly “nonstrategic” parental mediation emerging from parents’ and children’s lived experiences. Parental mediation studies originally reacted to children’s home TV viewing, but since then the focus has expanded to other media (Stastná, 2017), out of which digital media have their own digital parenting field. Our article, however, reflects the dialogic nature of diverse media genres and platforms (Woodfall & Zezulková, 2016). This is why digital parenting and parental mediation are both discussed here. Another reason is that both fields have neglected the role of parents’ cultural beliefs here theoretically framed as parental ethnotheories.

The concept of parental ethnotheories was coined within social anthropology by Super and Harkness (1986) as part of their “developmental niche” framework. The framework contains three interactive systems through which a child’s cultural environment can be

studied: 1) the physical (places) and social (people) settings; 2) upbringing customs and practices; and 3) parental ethnotheories, or parents' "culturally shared beliefs" (Harkness et al., 2011: 800). Harkness and Super (2005) further elaborated the framework by applying a hierarchical approach, firstly through proposing the leading role of parental ethnotheories due to their impact on where, with whom, and how children are being brought up. The framework has since been applied by various cultural and cross-cultural studies (e.g. Ganapathy-Coleman, 2013; Harkness et al., 2011; Mone et al., 2014), but not in the context of Roma parents' cultural beliefs.

Parental ethnotheories is undoubtedly an equivocal research area, and in the context of Romani culture also greatly complicated. Firstly, issues might arise from the ambiguous nature of "culture" that can be defined and understood in many ways (Woodfall & Zezulakova, forthcoming). For the purpose of this article we follow Stavenhagen's (1995: 67) understanding of culture as the "self-contained system of values and symbols [...] of a given social group" that forms a distinct collective identity. Secondly, an important but difficult question is if parents' beliefs are due to "culture" or whether they are more influenced by demographic and socioeconomic factors that often covary with cultural, or ethnic minority, groups (Harkness et al., 2011). For example, several studies focused on parental mediation in low-income and minority families suggest that they might have similar parental approaches to, and beliefs about, media and digital technology, that are at the same time different than those of the middle and upper class white families (e.g. Clark, 2009, 2013; Lareau, 2003; Notten & Kraayakamp, 2009; Warren, 2005). Warren (2005: 852) equally suggests that "no studies have reported any significant relationships between ethnicity and [...] mediation", which might however be caused by the difficulty of separating the often narrowly interconnected ethnicity and income.

Thirdly, identifying the role of Romani culture and collective identity in parental ethnotheories could arguably be particularly difficult and challenging. Among the reasons might be, for example, that Roma people do not have their own state of which national culture could serve as a reference point, and that Romani culture has been sustained mainly through oral tradition. On the other hand, Romani people have a unique cultural self-definition known as "romanipen", often referred to as the totality of what it means to be Roma (Frištenská et al., 2004). Sekyt (2003) suggests that romanipen is hard to explain or even recognise by non-Roma people as it is a question of emotions and feelings rather than of a clearly defined set of characteristics and norms. Within romanipen, one's willingness and desire to belong to the community and to follow its values and beliefs is what makes a person Roma regardless of his or her ethnicity. The role of "romanipen" as a form of Romani culture in parental ethnotheories is therefore not only more approachable, but as our research found, also more relevant to Roma children's digital and media lives.

## Research approach and design

With the aim to gain a greater understanding of Roma children's media and digital lives and learning, we conducted a small-scale ethnographic and phenomenological research in April and May 2016. The participants were six low- and one lower middle- income Czech families with young children in which at least one parent self-identified as being Roma. The participating families had a shared experience of racism, segregation and ethnic alienation, so it was crucial to thoroughly plan and make ethical and legal decisions throughout the entire research process.

Among the main decisions we had taken was to treat the participants as experts on their own lives, as well as to create and offer multiple opportunities for the participants to share their beliefs and experiences (Clark & Moss, 2005) and for us as researchers to openly and empathically see, listen and experience (Stein, 1916). The research therefore included multiple research techniques, including the participatory observations at the children's homes and in their communities and informal educational settings, in-depth interviews with three social workers, five mothers (as the fathers were not willing to be interviewed), and two grandparents, as well as unstructured conversations with nine children, out of which four additionally gave guided tours. For more detailed information about the research design, see Zezulkova (2016).

We will now focus solely on the parental, possibly cultural, beliefs of three families. As this was not a case study research, it is only for the purpose of this article that the following paragraphs are framed as family, concretely mothers and their children's, narratives. These mothers were chosen as their beliefs and experiences connected to children's learning in general, and in connection to media and digital technology in particular, illustrate well the overall research findings connected to the role of parental ethnotheories in parental mediation as the subsequent discussion section will highlight.

### *Alena's approach to upbringing and parental mediation*

Alena used to be a user of an NGO educationally and emotionally supporting Roma mothers and their children in need, an organisation through which we got in touch with her. This now middle-income family, including Alena's working husband, retired mother, a 6-year old girl and a 7-year old boy, moved from a segregated Roma community several years back. Alena has then begun to work as a social worker at the above mentioned NGO, leading its pre-school day care. Both her children have been attending a Waldorf School.

Alena began her story at the point of her life where the family moved out of the community. She said that "for two-three years during this transition, I did not belong anywhere, there was nowhere I was accepted except by the people at [the NGO]". She remembered that her family experienced discrimination and social distance from both "the new White neighbors and the Roma friends, because the Whites were suspicious

of us and the Gipsies said we weren't one of them anymore, [...] still today the Roma mothers call me *gadji* and say that I don't understand their situation".

Alena argued that being of Roma ethnicity only made life in the Czech Republic harder, so her children "don't even know what Gipsy is, they don't understand it, if they hear something, I explain it to them, but I raise them knowing they are the same as everyone else". On the same note Alena explained that for that reason her "kids don't live that Gipsy life, I don't raise them that way, that if you don't want to, you don't have to [...] and that they can do whatever they want all day long". Consequently, the children's after school time and weekends were divided in between unstructured leisure time and structured learning and family time.

At the time of the observations, the children's free time immediately after the school, and all the way until the homework time, was centered around digital and popular media, involving mostly PlayStation, mobile or computer gaming, online film streaming or a play with diverse toys related to their favourite media stories. The parents neither controlled the activities and media content, nor did they join the children. When asked, Alena did not see any risks or benefits linked to their media uses, except that it was a "great way for her children to relax before they have to do their homework". She had the same opinion about and parental approach to TV, which was the main medium involved in their family time with the father and the grandma being present as well. In contrast, the learning time at home was dominated by print media, mostly books, some of which Alena had written and drawn for her children as "a nice memory they will one day have". When it came to reading and learning from and with books, Alena was actively involved, giving it a sense of a family time.

### *Pavla's approach to upbringing and parental mediation*

Pavla was a housewife in a low-income family with seven children of ages ranging from just a few months to 10-years old. Her partner worked and their house was in a city suburb, where poorer (not only Roma) families lived. There was a public kindergarten, but the five pre-school aged children didn't attend; they used to go to the NGO's day-care, but not anymore. Pavla explained that with the newborn baby it was now difficult to take the other children to the NGO's daycare, which was an hour away by bus. The oldest son attended an elementary school, but the parents had decided to send him to a special school next year as he was, according to Pavla, failing all subjects.

Pavla did not talk much about education or her children's future, but when asked about her main role as a parent, she said it was to help them to "scrape through elementary school, to have the basics". Pavla said it would "make her very happy if they finished", but that she "won't force them into anything, that no, they can't do whatever they want, I don't let them, but also I don't force them to do things". She appreciated when her children found something they enjoyed, which included popular media texts and mobile phone and online games. The reasons were that the children entertained themselves, that it was a way of making them happy, and that they could learn something. For example, she

said about her 6-year old daughter Julie: “she loves Monster High and Frozen, coloring books, dolls, she can spend hours, alone, playing with it, [...] and when she celebrated her birthday, we made a Monster High cake for her, it was nice”. Julie also liked Hello Kitty games and, according to Pavla, the cooking one “taught her how to use cooking ingredients”. Having only one mobile phone in the family, Pavla said they had a ten-minute rule for taking turns, because otherwise they “keep arguing”.

### *Helena’s approach to upbringing and parental mediation*

Helena had four children. She was at home with the youngest son who was eight months old. Her oldest son was 8-years old and attended an elementary school where most students are Roma. Her two daughters, 6 and 7-years old, were both regular visitors of the NGO’s daycare. Helena’s husband was unemployed, receiving social security benefit. This low-income family lived in a residentially and socially segregated Roma neighborhood, referred to by the NGO’s social workers as “one of the city’s worst Roma ghettos”.

Helena, similarly to Pavla, said she would not force her children to study or do things they did not want to and that all she wanted as a parent was for her children to be “well-behaved”. At the center of her attention were her children’s own likes and interests, but in contrast to both Pavla and Alena, she actively took part in them. She read books to them, because the children themselves asked for it as they enjoyed it. She thought they might like it because “when I read to them, they have their own fantasy, on TV they have it all made already, like when the adult reads, the fantasy works”.

The issue Helena was dealing with, however, was access to digital technology which was subject to the families’ immediate economic situation. She said that usually “tablets, mobile phones, they have that a lot”, but continued that now “I don’t have money for it, so right now we don’t have it”. At the time of the research Helena mainly wished for her children to have a computer at home, saying “I agreed with my mum now, that she, because she has like more money, that she will help to buy a computer for the kids”. She then focused on the oldest, 8-year old David, saying whenever he is on a computer and on the internet, he “learns a lot of things, he finds there anything he is interested in” and continued that “he is too small now, but when he is bigger, he can learn English there, because books are expensive nowadays, but there he can find and learn anything”. Helena’s children shared with us their enjoyment of, interest in, learning and education, as for example David told us that what he liked most about school was the “curriculum” (“*učivo*”), what he most disliked was “the boys fighting”.

## Discussion

We chose to share the stories of these three families, because their beliefs about and approaches to upbringing and parental mediation illustrate well both the similarities and differences among the seven participating families and, possibly, their romanipen.

However, since parental mediation, parental ethnotheories and romanipen were not the original research focus, instead emerging from the field research as relevant and contextually important themes, the following interpretation and discussion should not be read as conclusions but rather as “introductions”. The overreaching argument is that research seeking more complex and research-grounded understanding of the interrelationships between parental ethnotheories and parental mediation (or digital parenting) would be valuable.

Such research could offer new interpretations, and expand existing knowledge, of parental mediation and digital parenting styles. For instance, highlighting the differences between the families, Alena's parental mediation could be compared to “parental interference” described by Westerik and colleagues (2007) as a deliberate interference with children's media use induced by parent's own ideas of what the child should do in order to grow up into a desired adult. Reproducing the popular distancing dichotomies between media platforms and genres (Woodfall & Zezulkova, 2016), books and literature were put the highest, while digital media and TV the lowest, within Alena's hierarchy based on the societal and learning importance assigned to them. Although Alena did not have protectionist parental mediation tendencies, she acted as an authoritative figure *shaping* the child into *becoming* a certain, for example well-read, adult. We call this *authoritative parental mediation*, which is comparable to Baumrind's (1967) parenting typology that considers authoritative parenting as the most preferable one for, although this goes without saying, the majority of society.

In contrast to Alena, in Pavla and Helena's cultural beliefs children were firstly *beings* and only then *becomings*, thus the focus was on their immediate needs and wants, including in connection to media and digital technology. Both mothers suggested that they would not force their children to anything, which is according to Frištenská and colleagues (2004) and Frištenská (2010) caused by one of romanipen's core values, this being “unconditional love for their children” (*authors' translation*). Whereas Alena's unconditional love meant to be future-orientated, for Pavla and Helena the present was important in its own right. However, even though Pavla and Helena's cultural belief was possibly in agreement, its translation into parental mediation practice varied, which suggests that having shared parental beliefs, cultural or not, does not necessarily lead to the same parental mediation.

Firstly, Pavla's *pragmatic parental mediation*, as we call it, was driven by pragmatic reasons, making their immediate life easier (e.g. by setting rules preventing arguments) and in her view possibly also happier (e.g. since media and digital technology were something the children enjoyed). This approach to the child's upbringing might however be compared to “natural growth parenting” based on the belief that the child becomes adult even without the parent's profound interference as observed by Laureau (2003) in American low-income families. This once again demonstrates the difficulty of clearly separating culture and income variables in parental beliefs and approaches to upbringing in general, and to parental mediation and digital parenting in particular.

Secondly, Helena's approach was also driven by the children's immediate happiness,

but in comparison to Pavla, she actively encouraged and above all joined her children in their media experience and learning for their mutual enjoyment and appreciation. She was practicing what we might call *engaged parental mediation*, with the primary goal being *sharing* rather than purposefully shaping her children's lives. Interpreting her parenting and parental mediation from the point of view of learning theories, we could argue that her approach was truly social constructivist. Her parental mediation was based on "the development of shared [...] understanding [and skills] of the subject and task in hand" (Laroche & Bednarz, 1998: 3). It is also possible that Helena's social constructivist engaged parental mediation supported and nurtured her children's interest in learning (Sivan, 1989), so "forcing" or purposeful shaping was not needed. This style of parental mediation thus challenges the media effect research tradition still dominating parental mediation and other relevant studies and practices (Clark, 2011).

Furthermore, the parental mediation studies have so far mostly focused on parents' beliefs about media and digital technology, which in the hierarchy of parental ethnotheories would be at the bottom, while the higher overall (cultural) ideas about the child have been mostly neglected. Equally the studies have mostly explored and examined the forms, techniques and/or effect of parental mediation (Valkenburg et al., 1999). Less attention has been paid to parents' motivations, which has usually been simplified to a dualistic differentiation between protectionism and empowerment. Clark (2011: 330) opposed this by saying that the decision about parental mediation strategy has to be understood in relation to a number of contextual factors, including the desire to be a "good parent". Our research is in agreement with Clark (2011), as we found that the overall beliefs (e.g. about children as being or becoming), and diverse motivations (e.g. immediate versus future children's happiness) were inseparable from the forms. Since we have already discussed the higher parental beliefs, we will now look deeper into the importance of motives behind parental mediation that could be connected to parental ethnotheories. For this we return to Alena.

Alena's cultural belief influencing her parental mediation was arguably impacted by her own experience of negotiating and choosing between the two cultural models – romanipen and the dominant white majority culture – rather than by romanipen itself. Roma people as a social group have a collective "history of oppression and forced assimilation", which has made many of them "reluctant to self-identify" (Walsh & Krieg, 2007: 170). For instance, Roma people in the Czech Republic still suffer the past "communist politics of assimilation" (Frištenská et al., 2004: 17), prevailing impacts of which make it harder for the recent integrational initiatives based on multicultural model and pluralistic approaches to have a wider impact. Alena's parental ethnotheory, that also played a role in her parental mediation, could have therefore been impacted by her belief that assimilation was the only way of achieving social equality. The negotiation between two, or more, cultural models in relation to one's social equality might be a shared experience of not only Roma people, but also other ethnic minority groups.

We argue that parental mediation driven by hope for social equality and life without discrimination should be studied further. Yet we do not suggest that the popular inte-

grational rhetoric surrounding Roma people's digital literacy (see e.g. A practical guide. The Roma people and the use of ICT as a socio-economic and cultural inclusion tool) should also penetrate parental mediation research, theory and practice. While access to digital technology undoubtable is an existing issue, the motivation of providing low-income Romani families access should not be an integrational one. We fear that the borderline between assimilation and integration of Romani people is still too thin, so even well-meant discourse, policies and practices might have a different impact on Roma parents and their children than intended by the majority society, us researchers included.

## Conclusion

In this article we suggested that romanipen as a set of cultural beliefs, and the Roma minority's negotiation of multiple cultural models, could play an important role in Roma parents' ethnotheories. Concretely, we highlighted how parental ethnotheories of the marginalised Czech Roma mothers caring for young children were potentially connected to their parental mediation approaches, motivations and forms. The aim of this article, however, was not to link romanipen to concrete parenting styles. We argued against causal understanding of these connections and instead tried to portray their contextual and socially constructed interdependence.

Drawing upon various possible interrelations, we offered alternative parental mediation concepts (authoritative, pragmatic and engaged). These concepts, as well as any arguments we made, are tentative; they are open to any re-interpretation and re-use. They were developed not to conclude but to encourage discussion. Therefore, our main goal was to at least partially demonstrate the possible relevance of parental ethnotheories, and the value of their research, to parental mediation (and digital parenting) theory and practice. Yet such research can only be relevant and valuable when Romani people, and arguably all minority groups, are treated as experts on their own lives.

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