

PROMOTION OF MENTAL HEALTH IN ROMA PEOPLE - SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL BEING IN A ROMA COMMUNITY

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Background: Gypsies and Travellers have been described as one of the most marginalized minorities in society with poor living conditions which are known to have a negative effect on health. Published research on the mental health needs of the Roma population is sparse. Knowledge of Social representations of mental health is fundamental for improving mental illness prevention strategies and mental health education programmes targeted to Roma people.

Aim: The aim of this research was to understand **the Social representations of mental health** among a group of Roma people in the center of Portugal (city of Coimbra).

Methods: This study covered twenty Roma children aged 6 to 11, in a Basic school located in a Roma neighborhood, as well as a group of adults and Roma families. Qualitative methodologies were used in data collection: semi-structured interviews, analysis of documents and *Focus Group* techniques.

Results: Findings suggest that social representations of mental health and emotional well-being in Roma participants have a strong holistic and integrative component. There is no marked cleavage between the concept of "physical health" and "mental health." In this group, the notions of mental health and emotional well-being appear to be strongly associated with the welfare of the family - including extended family -, in addition to the individual's own emotional well-being.

Conclusions: Mental health interventions with Roma community members must meet their social representations relating to mental health, access to mental health provision and contacts with mental health professionals,