

Overcoming prejudice through education

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Abstract: *According to the early scholars of social pedagogy, the human mind – once a theory is set up (either because it is generally recognized and people believe in it, or because it is comfortable), forces everything else to re-confirm that statement: and even numerous and convincing examples that prove the opposite are left ignored, scorned or rejected through fierce and unjust prejudice – rather than sacrificing the authority of the original conclusion. (Bacon, 1954) According to Allport – a prominent figure of social psychology – preliminary judgements become a prejudice if they can not be changed by new ideas. (Allport, 1977) In my study I aim to present a way to form the students' perspective by introducing them new academic and practical experiences and knowledge.*

Keywords: **prejudice, Gypsy/Roma, higher education, theory, practice, social distance scale**

Introduction

Prejudices are based on various subjects; they can be sexual, religious, economic, cultural, sanitary, political, even gastronomic. These are mainly focused only on the behaviour or attitude of a certain person. But when it is focused on a group of people, it often generates inequality, seriously damaged interactions, threat, discrimination, even violence. It is fundamentally destructive to the life of the concerned minority and the whole society. It is essential to avoid the formation of inter-group prejudice, and to develop acceptance at universities as well. As per the resolution of the Reformed synod and the administration of the university, Romani studies was introduced compulsorily from the academic year of 2016/17 at Debrecen Reformed Theological University - including all departments and all forms of training. The administration of the university asked me to establish and lead the department.

The necessity for these courses is clearly supported by domestic researches on prejudice; according to a survey, teachers are moderately prejudiced, one third of them are highly discriminative (Bordács, 2001), 14% of the students of teacher training are obsessively prejudiced or racist, and only 7.4% is unprejudiced, open-minded, and tolerant. (NEKI 2001) A nationwide random survey performed in 2016 identified that three-quarters of the population is prejudiced against Gypsy people, 70% of the students are prejudiced, and 10% of them is strongly radical. (Váradi, 2016) The Mission Department of the Reformed Church performed a nationwide survey among clergymen in 2012-2013, and the results show that among the 700 communities, 55% of the clergymen lacked specialized experts for the mission between Gypsy people, and 60% lacked the help of a prepared associate worker.

Hence, Debrecen Reformed Theological University became the first university where each and every student mandatorily learns about Roma people for three semesters. The courses are structured as follows; Religious Degree Programmes (Reformed Theology, Reformed Theology - Ministry Training Education, Reformed Cantor, Teacher of Religious Education, Pastoral Consultant - Organisation-developer, Teacher of Reformed Faith and Ethics) and Other non-religious degree programmes (School-teacher programme, School-teacher programme - additional specializations, Youth worker /Youth helper). Every student shall participate in Romology courses two sessions a week for three semesters. The subjects are built on each other; the history of Roma people in the first semester, then the tradition and culture in the second, and the final subject is one of the following, specific to the students' major; Gypsy/Roma Ministry (A way how to serve among gypsies), Integrative, inclusive pedagogy in education of Gypsy/Roma children, The Roma beliefs, folk religiosity, religious practice, Gypsy music and dance culture. Music service between Gypsies, Social Pedagogy and organizational development in Gypsy/Roma communities, Introduction into the Gypsy language. Students of religious major understand how to serve successfully among Gypsy people; whether there are any specifics in gypsy mission (and what are those), and they get to know the principles and practice of the Gypsy Mission of the Hungarian Reformed Church. Those pursuing pedagogical studies acquire the successful and effective method and practice of teaching disadvantaged – not limited to Roma – children; and they learn the methodology of inclusive teaching. Combining theoretic and practical training is highly important during these three semesters in order to achieve sensitization in addition to transmitting information. By widening their knowledge, students recognize and understand the causal relationship of the current situation – educational, housing, employment and sanitary – of Roma people in Hungary, and the reasons for the behavior and motivation of children and families coming from a poor culture or different socialization. After understanding the whys, they can answer and learn the hows. In order to create a realistic picture about Roma people, students familiarize themselves with prominent figures of Gypsy people – now living or from the past – in Hungary and around the world; writers, poets, artists, actors, politicians, scientists, and saints of Gypsy origin unknown to them.

In my opinion, it is very important to measure and evaluate – in case of all universities – the results of this theoretical and practical training developed and taught by me. The subject of my study and the topic of my presentation is to demonstrate the results and the progress of the three-semester long training that ended in December, 2017 at Debrecen Reformed Theological University. According to the questionnaires and scales measuring the degree of social separation, prejudice among students hit a serious rate of 15% in September, 2016 which decreased to 3% by December, 2017. The students of school-teacher were after all prejudiced: 32% of them would eliminate completely Roma people from the country in September 2016, which decreased to 3% by December 2017. Positive attitude (marriage, friendship) increased from 44% to 55%.

Framework and methodology of the research

The research consists of three phases.

Study I. In September, 2016, during the introduction of the first session of Romology 1, students were asked to fill a questionnaire anonymously that I prepared. They only had to provide their sex, major, and type of training. The questionnaire – that I call the Course motivation questionnaire – included questions such as: do you think it is important to teach Romology (please explain your answer); what are your experiences with Roma people; what do you know about Roma people; what do you expect from this course; and everyone had to fill a *Bogardus social distance scale*. Each and every student from all majors filled this questionnaire. In my study, A1 stands for the answers of students of Reformed Theology (Th), Reformed Theology-Ministry Training (MT) and Pastoral Consultant (PC)-Organization-developer majors, while B1 stands for the questionnaires of pedagogy students – School-teacher (T) and Youth Worker/Youth Helper (YW/YH). T1 (all) is the aggregated answers and results of those with religious and not religious majors before starting Romology studies.

Study II. In December, 2017 – at the end of the three semesters of Romology courses – I asked the students again to fill a questionnaire similarly to the previous one. In the questionnaire – that I call the Course rating questionnaire – they were asked whether they considered these courses important (with explanation); was there something that they missed; what did they learn from it; what will they take away from it; and they filled the Bogardus social distance scale again. In my study, A2 stands for the results of those with religious major, and B2 stands for those with non-religious major, while T2 stands for the overall answers.

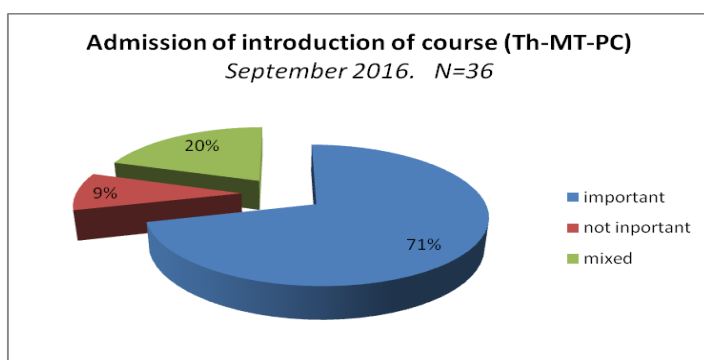
Study III. In March, 2018, I finished summarizing the data; I compared the "input" and the "output" results, measured the changes, and the shift in opinions and prejudice – separately in both groups and then all students together.

Answers, results received during the study

Study I. (N=91)

A1. In September, 2016, students with religious major (36) reacted to the introduction of the courses as follows: 71% considered it important, 9% rejected it, and 20% had mixed feelings about it.

Figure 1. Admission of introduction of course September 2016 – Students of religious major (N=36)



Their explanation included the following:

Important (71%), because:

„The country is gradually becoming overpopulated by Gypsy people.” „Gypsy people may be the potential for the Reformed church in the future.” „Them shall not be judged by Christians.” „For the service...” „To understand them.” „For the mission.” „... to create a better coexistence.” „How to deal with them?” „It might be helpful in passing on the gospel to our Gypsy brothers.” „To help them find Jesus, and break away from their superstitions.”

Not important (9%), because:

They are unable and unwilling to adapt.” „This course will not change my mind.”

Mixed (20%):

„We’ll see... - they are part of our job.” „I abstain – we might as well talk about the elderly or the handicapped – we are already overwhelmed.”

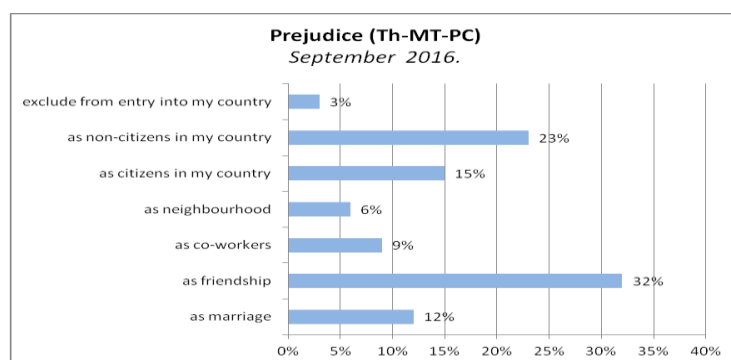
As for what they expect from this course, many of them explained their personal fears and weaknesses about how to perform well among Gypsy people, and how to spread the word of God and lead them to Jesus.

Expects:

„Helps! One of my personal fears is that I will not find the common voice with Roma brothers.” „I would like to know more about Gypsy people beyond my bad experiences...” „I wait for the demolition of the stereotypes, prejudices.” „How I may guide them to Christ?” „To get to know to know their history and culture.” „To understand their motives.” „To get to know why do they live so? Why do they arise?” „How shall I teach them if they appear in the congregation?”

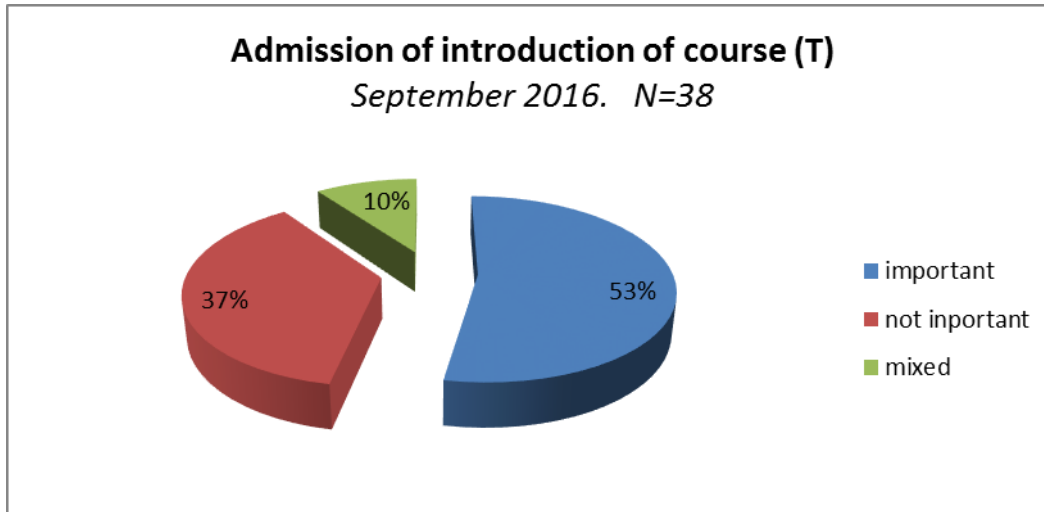
The Bogardus scale showed the following about prejudice: 26% of students of religious major strongly disliked and acted with prejudice against Gypsy people; 3% wanted them out of the country. What is remarkable is that 44% think that a closer relationship is acceptable; 12% would even marry, 32% would become friends with Roma people.

Figure 2. Prejudice September 2016 – Students of religious major (N=36)



B1. Students of school-teacher showed significantly worse results; only 53% of those in teacher training considered the course important, 37% of them rejected it, and 10% received it with mixed feelings.

Figure 3. Admission of introduction of course September 2016 – Students of School-teacher (N=38)



Their explanations reflect quite pronounced opinions:

Not important (37%), because:

"They don't need special treatment." "Nothing." "They are given too much benefit. I don't think I would change my mind."

"We shouldn't waste time on them." "We are already outnumbered by them."

It is important to highlight positive and mature opinions such as the following:

Important (53%), because:

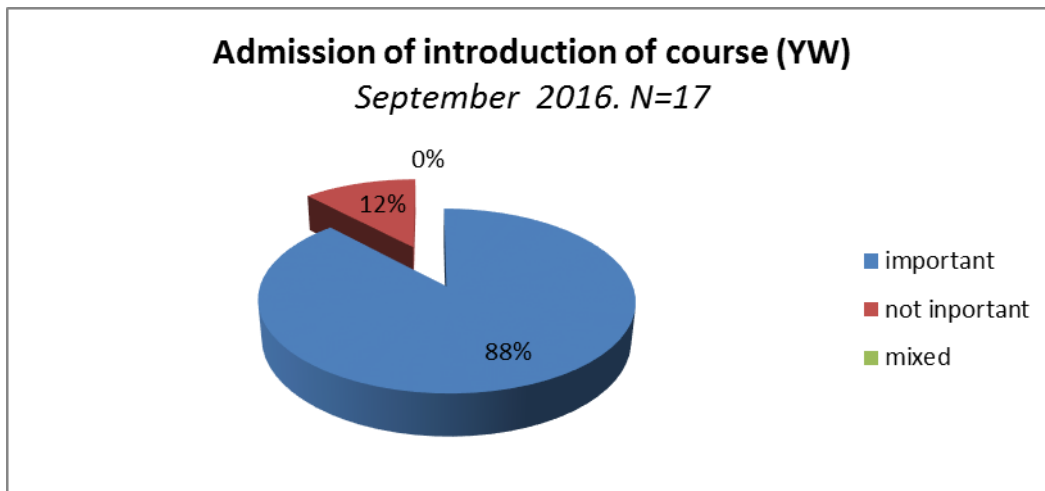
"I would like to know more about gypsy people beyond my bad experiences..." "We have to learn how to treat them so that they will listen to us." "It prepares me how to manage different situations." "Because they require special parenting." "To understand them." "To see into their lives, to help them." "How to treat them?" "To overcome prejudice." "To get to know them instead of listening to prejudice."

And the **Mixed (10%)** answers:

"It depends... - if it helps find a strategy to manage Gypsy children." "It is partly important – what is that triggers their negative behavior?"

Youth worker/youth helper students were much more open-minded about it, only 12% received it negatively.

Figure 4. Admission of introduction of course September 2016 – Students of Youth Worker/Youth Helper (N=17)



Based on the answers to the question: „*What do you expect from this course?*” students of non-religious major wished to acquire not only general knowledge but also methodology in order to know how to teach, how to help those children.

Expects:

”Methods! In order to avoid situations I cannot handle as a teacher.” *”To get to know their history and culture. To understand their motives.”* *” How to involve them in studying?”* *”To acquire positive knowledge about them”* *”To understand why do they live like this”* *”Why won’t they fit in?”* *”How to act properly and lovingly with Roma children?”*

They were strongly prejudiced: 64% of teacher students would eliminate completely Roma people from their surroundings; 32% would like them out of the country. None of them would marry someone of Roma origin, and only 13% would make friendship with them.

Figure 5. Prejudice September 2016 – Students of school-teacher (N=38)

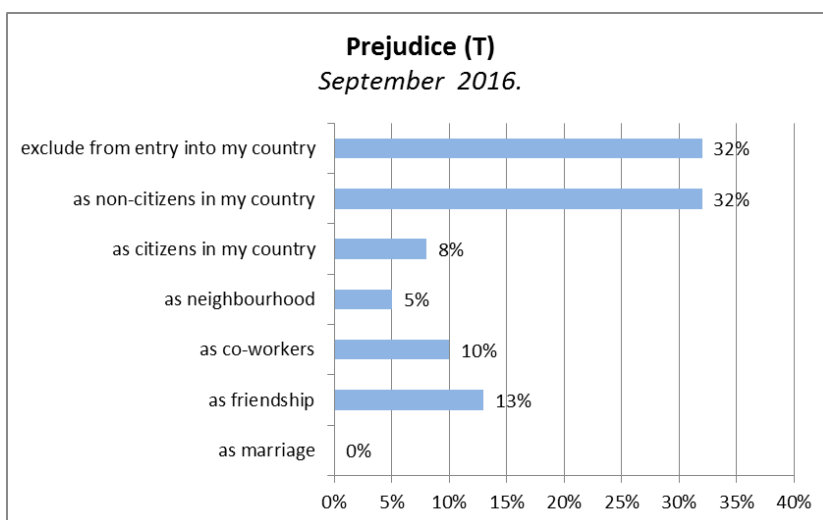
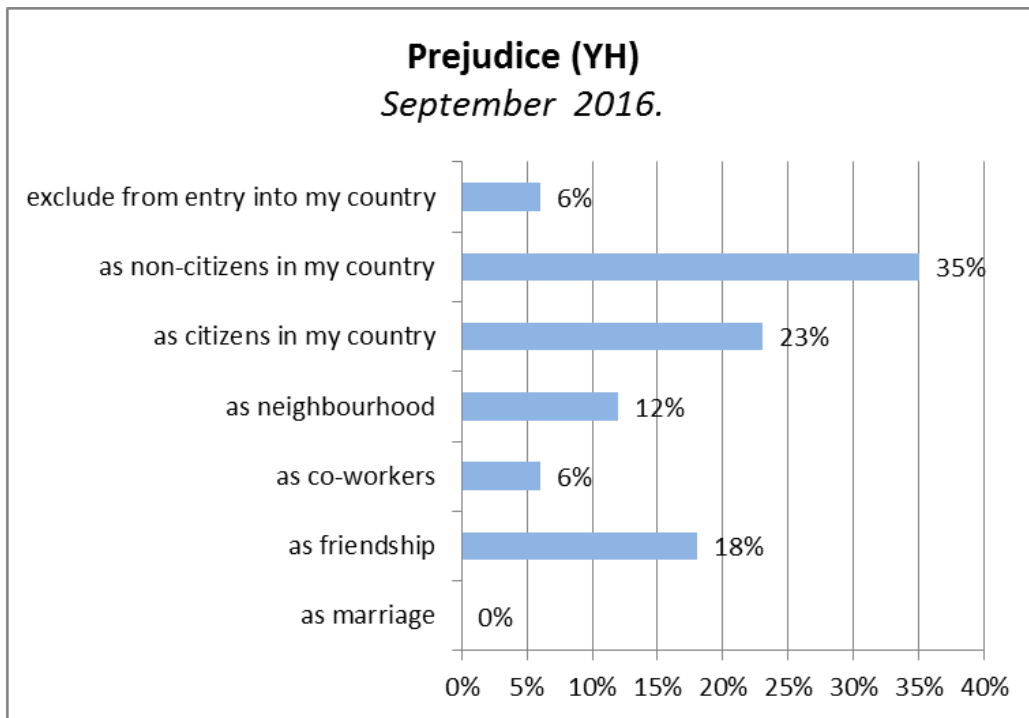


Figure 6. Prejudice September 2016 – Students of Youth worker/Youth helper (N=17)

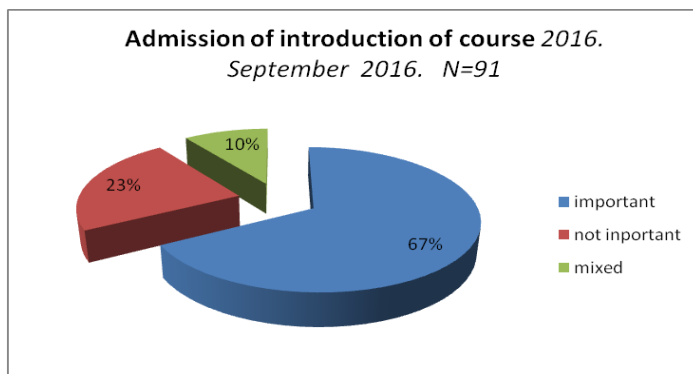


The first result of my study was generated from these answers. There is significant difference between the opinion, prejudice and attitude of students of the two types. The attitude of students of religious major towards Roma people is far more positive – which originates from their faith, religious attitude, and Christian upbringing.

The beginning September 2016

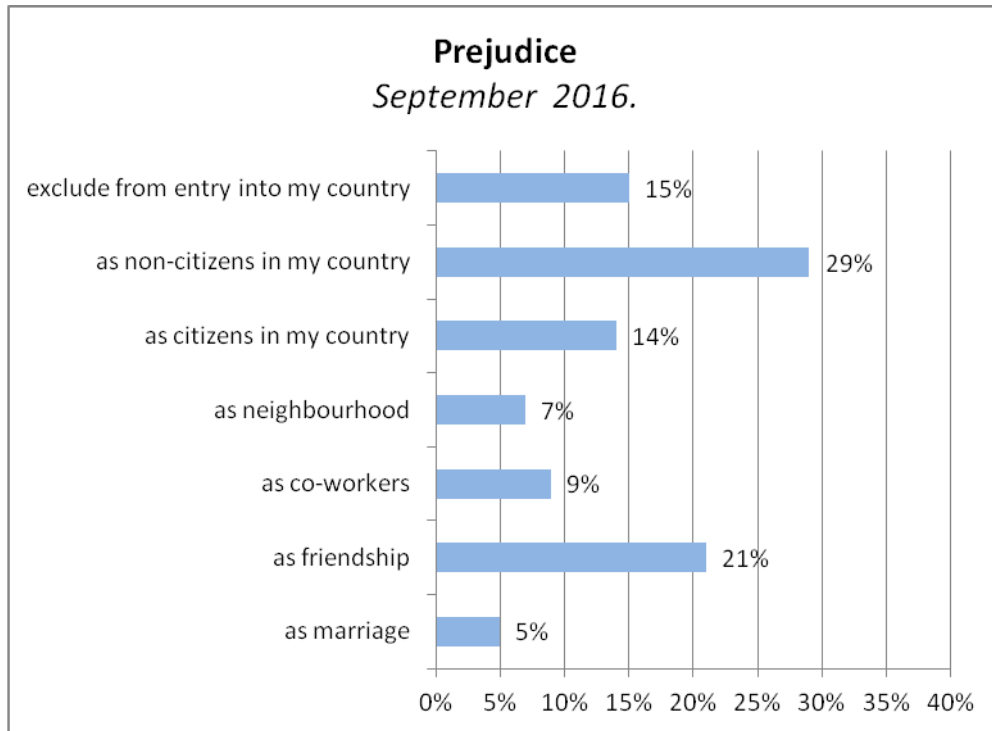
The following aggregated result was obtained after the closure of the initial phase of the study: 91 students started Romology courses in September, 2016 out of which 67% considered it important, 23% considered it was not important, and 10% had mixed feelings ("we'll see" approach).

Figure 7. Admission of introduction of course September 2016 – Total (N=91)



The rate of prejudice was very high; 44% of the students had a negative attitude towards Roma people, and 15% wanted them out of the country. Only 26% could imagine a closer relationship with a Roma person.

Figure 8. Prejudice September 2016 – Total (N=91)



Education and practice September 2016 – December 2017

Afterwards, students took part in the courses between September, 2016 and December, 2017. I tried to impart as much information as I could, and to have them experience and acquire the same amount of practical, methodological, and sensitizing experience and knowledge. For this, we did field trips several times in each semester to face the theories in practice. We visited Gypsy colonies, and attended the Gypsy mission, congregation gatherings in the Nyírség, in Hajdú-Bihar county, and in district eight of the capital city, national Gypsy mission meetings in Budapest, and home prayer meetings. The students talked to Roma people whose life had changed by their faith, and gained experience from ministers who were either invited to the university or visited at field trips, and who have been serving in the Gypsy mission for years or decades. Between September, 2016 and December, 2017, non-religious students did important visits to Gypsy colonies, kindergartens, and schools, where they got to know the work of Sure Start Children's Centers and Schools, and foundations that aim to help Gypsy people (e.g. Real Pearl Foundation). They had to prepare a report about these field trips, and we processed and talked through these experiences. At the end of each semester, they had to take oral and written exams. In addition to those, I organized an exhibition from the works of contemporary Gypsy artists, and we held a day of Gypsy mission. Leaders and colleagues of the Reformed Gypsy Mission with their converts, and a

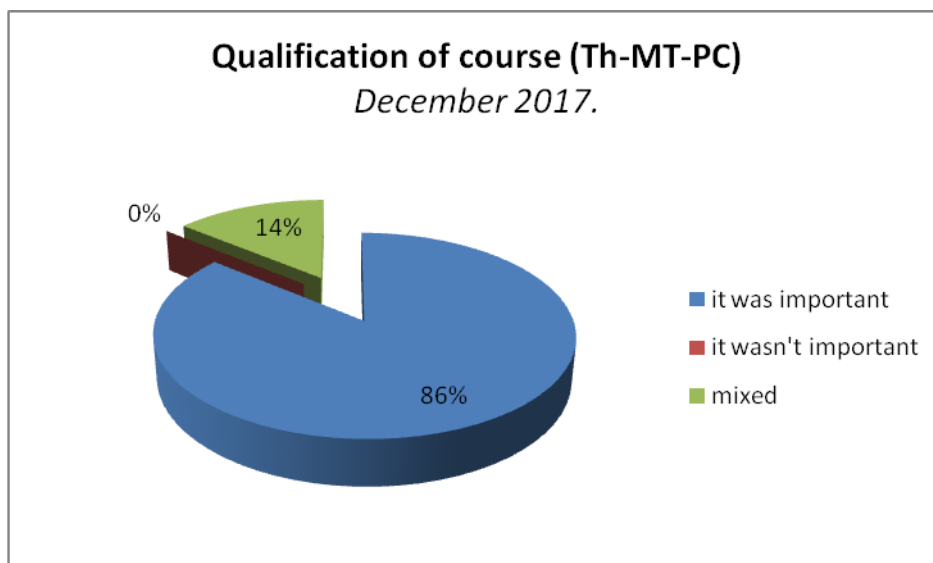
Reformed clergyman of Gypsy origin took part and talked about their life and service. Famous young Gypsies were also invited to talk about their life and path.

Study II. (91)

In December, 2017 the first complete Romology course ended after the exams. The result of the answers from the students is the following:

A2. 86% of students of religious major considered the courses important, 14% had mixed feelings, and no one considered it useless.

Figure 9. Qualification of course December 2017– Students of religious major (Th-MT-PC). (N=36)



Their answers were honest, and even those with mixed feelings provided positive answers.

It was important (86%)

„I have learnt a lot, it was rewarding.”

„I know the reasons.”

„Especially the third semester was interesting and practical.”

„I liked it. It was useful. If it wasn't mandatory, we probably wouldn't deal with it.”

„It proved to be a very useful course despite of me being skeptical about it. I got to know a lot of useful information. Thank you!”

„This course confronted us with our own prejudice in particular. These prejudices were refuted which brought us closer to this distant and outcast group of people.”

„I liked this course. Year by year, I felt closer to the Gypsy mission. Today, I think it is absolutely necessary for me to deal with Gypsy people once I become a priest.”

„It was quite useful, however I did not like the idea of learning about it initially.”

It wasn't important (0%)

Mixed (14%)

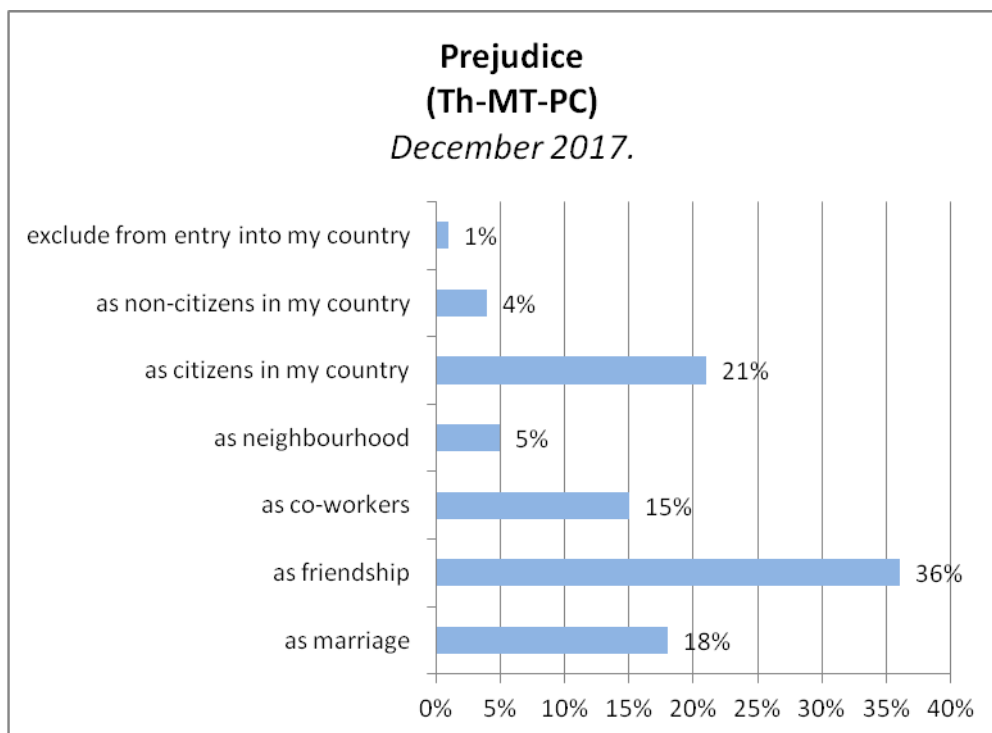
„It was interesting and useful. I am grateful for the comprehensive knowledge I acquired.”

Their answers to the question: "What do you take away from the course?" reflect it clearly.

„The fact that getting to know other people's culture helps understand them.””Honor. Attitude.” ”More acceptance, respect.””A lot of useful advice to take.” “The importance of tearing down the wall between Hungarian and Gypsy people.” “They are just like us.””All the love I was enriched with during the three semesters.” “Do not be judgmental.”

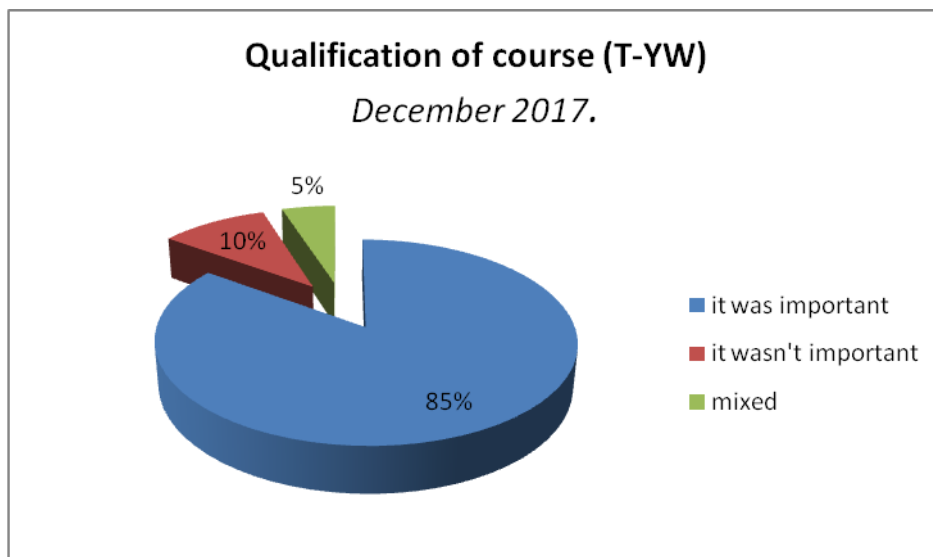
Heavy prejudice was only 1% (to get them out of the country), 18% can imagine marriage, and 36% can imagine friendship with Roma people.

Figure 10. Prejudice December 2017 – Students of religious major (Th-MT-PC) (N=36)



B2. 85% of students of non-religious major considered the courses important, 5% had mixed feelings, while 10% considered it unimportant.

Figure 11. Qualification of course December 2017 – Students of non-religious major (T-YW) (N=55)



Their explanations were also honest; they admitted that they received the courses reluctantly, but their opinion changed afterwards.

It was important (85%)

"It was interesting, I learned a lot of new things."

"Although, I felt a little averse about this course, I was disappointed positively. I realized that this is a good subject. In the meantime, I got involved in a congregation full of Roma people through my partner. This course helped me understand them in many ways."

"It was useful and interesting, and we could share our opinion."

"We learned quite useful things, and we could share our own experiences."

"I enjoyed these courses in each semester." "It changed my viewpoint significantly."

"The lectures were enjoyable, provided new information, and were clearly structured."

"Interactive sessions, everyone could share their opinion."

"At first, everyone grumbled about it, but later we understood that we need to learn about this."

It wasn't important (10%)

"It was not that easy for me: sometimes it was hard to face the facts, while other times I felt enraged." „I have my own experience." „For me, the part not only about Gypsy people was important."

Mixed (5%)

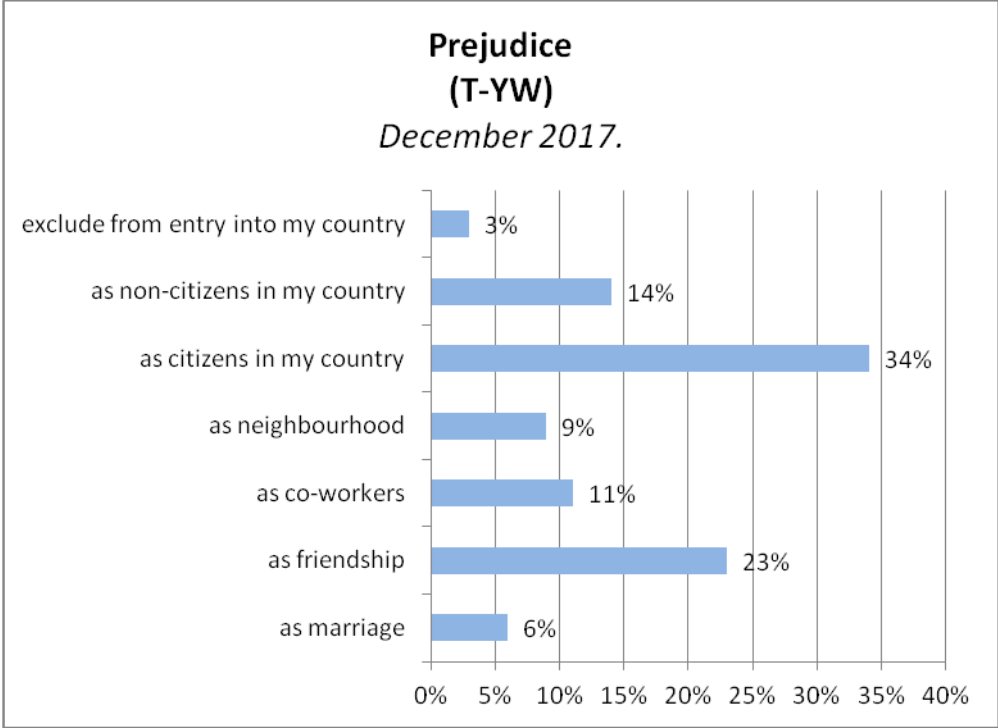
"The lectures were interesting, and we got to learn a lot of new and important information."

Their answers to the question "What do you take away from the course?" say a thousand words. They acquired important things with respect to knowledge, attitude, sensitivity, and methodology:

"How to handle Roma children." "That it is important to talk to Roma children." "How to support their development." "That we can work and develop only together by providing equal opportunities." "Culture, love, acceptance, the importance of equal opportunity." "How to handle difference, and tools for teaching." "The feeling of motivation for making a change." "We need to take more care of Gypsy children, because they need love, and once they open up to us, it is easier to cooperate with them." "Appropriate attitude." "More intense sensitivity." "My viewpoint has changed a lot." "I see a lot of things differently." "Inclusive teaching for a successful career." "Essential elements." "Methods."

The Bogardus scale confirms the change as well; only 3% want them out of the country, 6% can imagine marriage, 23% can imagine friendship with Roma people.

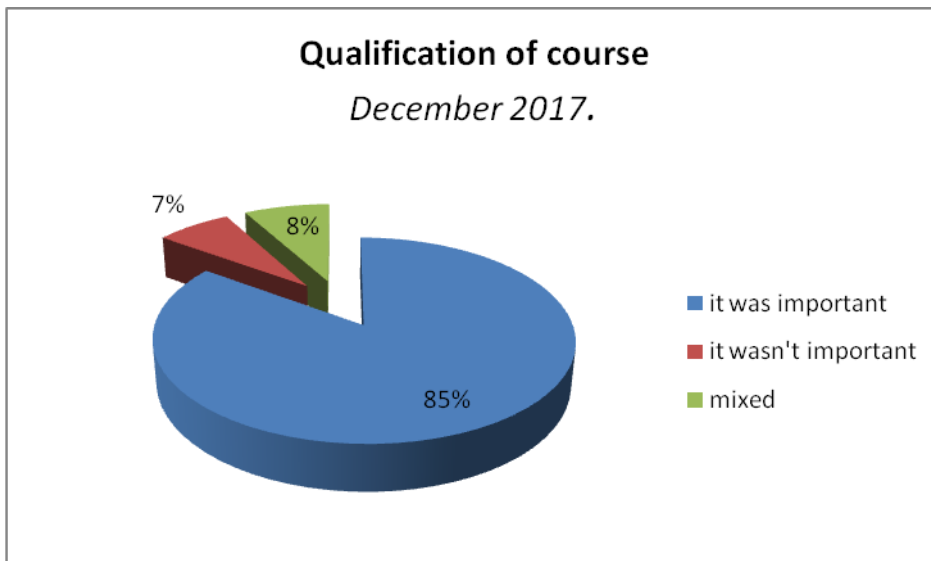
Figure 12. Prejudice December 2017 – Students of non-religious major (T-YW) (N=55)



The ending December 2017

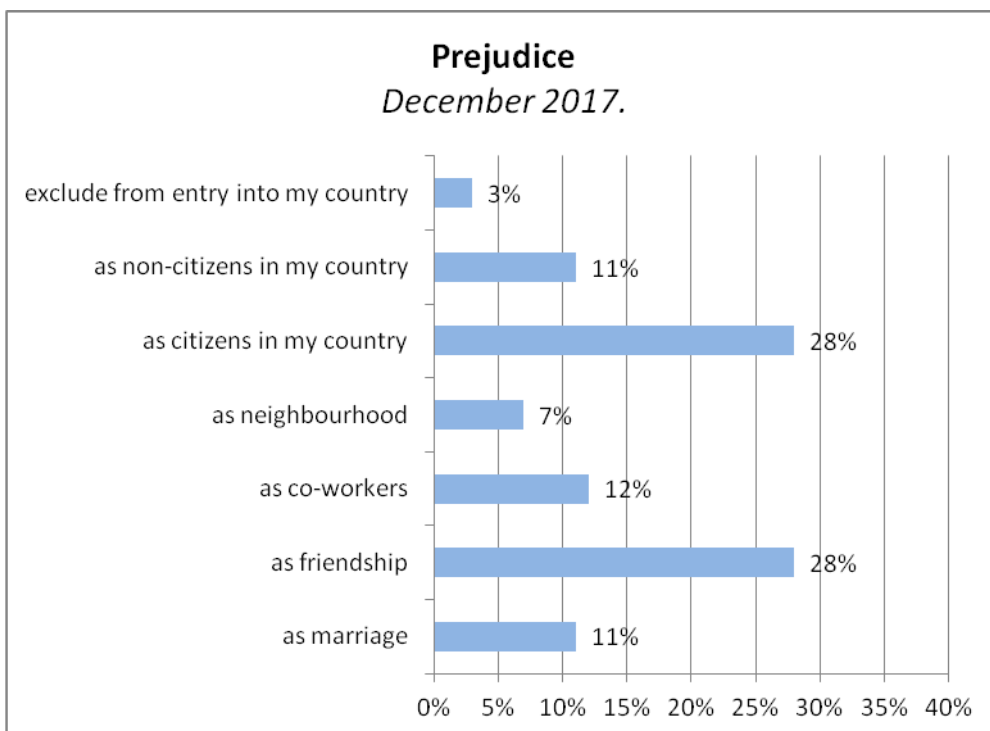
Aggregated data after the closure of the courses in December, 2017 are the following: 85% of the participants considered it important, 7% considered it unimportant, and 8% had mixed feelings.

Figure 13. Qualification of course December 2017. –Total (N=91)



14% of the students had a negative attitude towards Roma people, and 39% did not rule out marriage of friendship.

Figure 14. Prejudice December 2017. – Total (N=91)

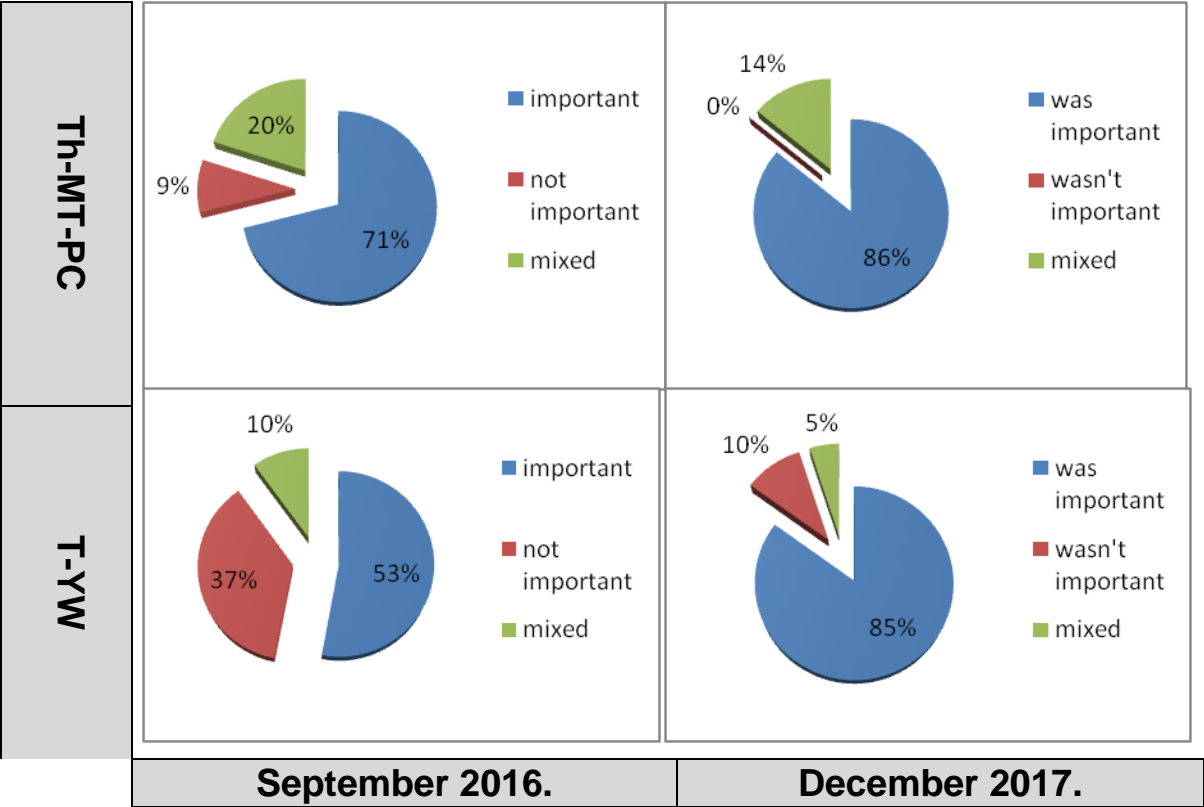


Study III. (91)

I received remarkably positive results when comparing the data of September, 2016 and December, 2017 in March, 2018. Even though I noticed the change in students, I did not expect it to be this level.

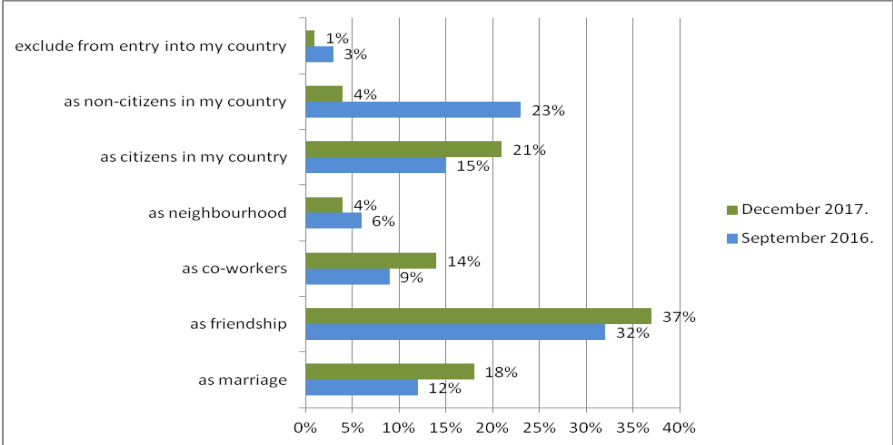
There was significant change in their opinion about the courses: 90% of those of religious major considered it important, and the rate of those who considered it unnecessary (9%) disappeared. The change in the opinion of non-religious students was even greater; the rate of those who considered Romology courses important increased by 32% (to 85%).

Figure 15. The change of opinion of course September 2016 – December 2017. – Total



Prejudiced attitude decreased dramatically; it fell to 5% from 26% for those of religious major, while positive attitude (marriage, friendship) increased from 44% to 55%.

Figure 16. The change of prejudice September 2016 – December 2017. Students of religious major (N=36)



The improvement is even more impressive for those of non-religious major; the rate of strong aversion fell from 64% to 17% (the rate of those who wanted them out of the country fell from 32% to 3%), and the rate of those who can imagine close relationship with them (marriage, friendship) increased from 13% to 29%.

Figure 17. The change of prejudice September 2016 – December 2017. – Students of non-religious major (N=55)

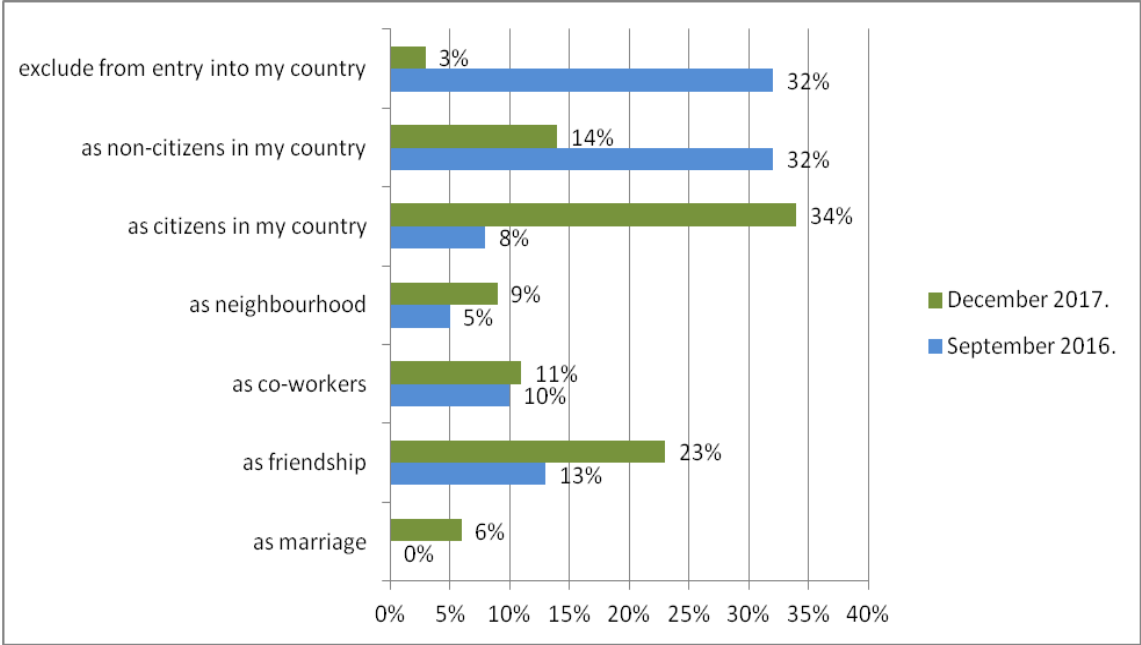
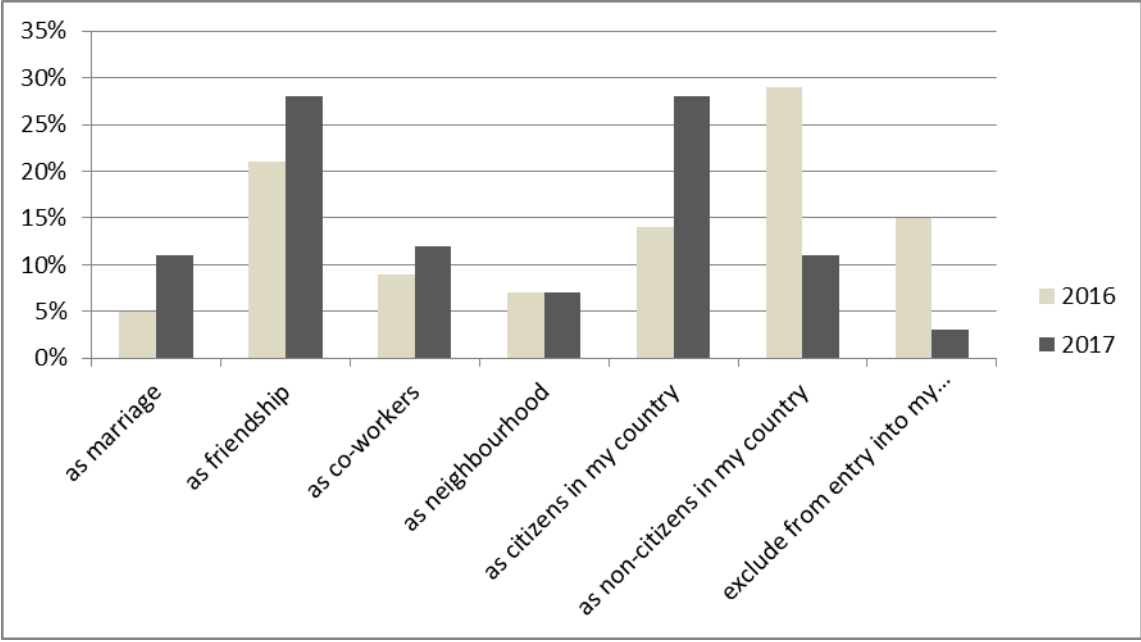


Figure 18. The change of prejudice September 2016 – December 2017. – Total (N=91)



Summary

The rising generations - especially those who will work in the area of service and education - will definitely get in contact with Gypsy/Roma children and adults. It is important to be prepared with sufficient knowledge, sentiment, orientation, and information for their work. The success and efficiency of their work is the guarantee to the emergence of Gypsy people and to social reconciliation. These studies clearly prove that it is not late to fight racism, stereotypes, and prejudice even at higher education. However, it requires time - three semesters seemed enough -, a well-structured syllabus, and a lot of practical training and sensitization.

This is the only way - "by utilizing newly explored knowledge" - to change preliminary judgments and avoid them to become prejudice.

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