

Vulnerabilities Built in the Identities and Future Orientation of Roma Children and Youth

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Abstract: The article is based on research with different age segments of Roma children and youth, whose self-concepts are marked by the perceptions of the Roma identity in the public opinion. The authors look at vulnerabilities reflected in the identities of Roma school children of different ages, as they appear in children's self-esteem and future orientation. We show fragments of testimonials of children living in Roma communities and interpret them according to different psychological, psychoanalytical and social approaches. We reveal some of the unifying elements of all children's identity formation, but also some of the context specific differential elements related to the development as a Roma child, living in a specific neighbourhood and learning in a certain school. Our goal is to draw attention to the mechanisms that can lower the educational aspirations of Roma children and adolescents and might contribute to the appearance of frustration and thus the reproduction of feelings of alterity and marginality.

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Introduction

Identity, situated at the core of the self, results in behavioural and affective outcomes, for example to influence children's and adolescents' future orientation and career aspirations. Needs and motivations lead to aspirations, goals and behaviours that accompany development of children and youth. Self-efficacy, as the capacity to pursue one's goals, is a result of reflections on cognitive and psychosocial abilities and largely influence outcomes as school performance and career attainment. In this paper we ask ourselves and invite our young Roma interviewees to explain us how their ethnic identity interferes with their future orientation and marks it with ethnically biased negative emotionality due to the discrimination they perceive. Observing the numerous acts of ethnic discrimination that surrounds the Roma in present days' Romanian society, though we understand the variance within this ethnic group, we presume that discrimination is going to mark development and career aspiration of Roma children and adolescents.

1. Reflections on the construction of identity and the ethnic identity of Roma youth

The social construction of identity, along with the social interactions that shape the process of identity construction have been widely debated in the last couple of decades, in all social sciences. Studies regarding identity construction in Roma have often focused on ethnic identity and cultural identity, to describe Roma with strong social networks inside the same community, low mobility rate and often difficulty and conflict while exploring and affirming their own ethnic identity.¹ We acknowledge here the influence of Erikson's ego development theory (1968) on the identity construction process that combined individual and psychological elements of identity formation, with social interaction concepts and envisages adolescence as having the main task to detach from parents' expectations to form their own sense of selves, career and other future aspirations. Symbolic interactionist theories, originating with G. H. Mead, revealed the symbols and meanings associated with human social behaviours and their effects on expectations from selves and others. Identity Theory (IT) as developed later by Sheldon Stryker²³ and Peter J. Burke⁴⁵ provides the necessary theoretical means for understanding the interference of social and psychological influences: how selves influence society by creating groups, institutions and networks, while being influenced by society through language and meanings that enable the individual to engage in social interaction by taking one role or another.⁶ *Role-based identity* and *salience* are the key concepts in IT. The theory states that the roles taken by the individuals are central in understanding identity construction, due to the positions they delineate for identity formation.⁷ The individual's reflections about self are influenced both by society and the individual's behaviour through the mechanism of role prescription transmission, a component of the self.⁸ As people understand and perform their multiple roles in society, they evoke different aspects of their selves, according to the salience of the role appropriate identities. As role performers, individuals select among their own identities,

¹ Florina Pop and Claudia Drăgulin, *Identity building in the context of inter-generational social reproduction: the voices of two Romanian Roma*, (Iași: Analele Științifice ale Universității Ioan Cuza 1/ 2012), 191- 208.

² Sheldon Stryker, Identity competition: key to differential social movement involvement, in *Identity, Self, and Social Movements*, eds. Sheldon Stryker, Timothy J. Owens, Robert W. White (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2000), 21-40.

³ Sheldon Stryker, "Identity theory and personality theory: mutual relevance", *Journal of Personality* 75 (2006): 1083- 1102.

⁴ Peter J. Burke, "Identity Processes and Social Stress", *American Sociological Review* 56 (1991): 836-849.

⁵ Peter J. Burke, "Can You See What I See?", in *Control Systems Theories in Sociology*, eds. Kent A. McClelland and Thomas J. Fararo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁶ Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "A sociological approach to self and identity", in *Handbook of Self and Identity*, eds. Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney (New York: The Guilford Press, 2003), 128- 152.

⁷ Michael A. Hogg, Deborah J. Terry and Katherine M. White, "A Tale of two theories: a critical comparison of identity theory", *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58 (1995): 255- 269.

⁸ Peter J. Burke, "The Self: measurement implications from a symbolic interactionist perspective", *Social Psychology Quarterly* 43 (1980): 18- 29.

according to the salience of the identity structure.¹ By the roles taken in society, individuals define themselves as objects in certain social positions in specific social contexts. Referring to role-based identity, Deaux and Burke² bring forward the idea that the existence of socially defined shared meanings is reflected in both the assumption that self is influenced by society and that shared meanings are incorporated in the individual's identity standard. Based on these ideas, ethnic identity development means "that individuals learn about their culture, shared origins, geography, religion and their language from individuals who are often connected by strong loyalty, and kinship as well as proximity"³. Phynney places ethnic identity of dominant groups against that of minority groups⁴. He reveals that both groups have to resolve the conflicts for being either dominant or subordinated, thus being confronted with discrimination from one of these two perspectives. This implies that members of a dominated minority group have to face unpleasant experiences of manifest or latent, verbal or physical hostility or violence and stereotyping, which they have to integrate in their individual and group identity. More than this, they also learn to identify the individuals of the majority as dominants, and react by exaggerated cautiousness or by aggressiveness.

Ethnic groups are hosts of identity ideologies of superiority or inferiority. In the construction of the ideology of the 'destructive' group there is no place for discovering the reality, or learning, or development. Building on the early thoughts of LeBon, Hinshelwood describes group identities as either characterized by being destructive or constructive for the individual identity formation. According to this group-psychoanalyst, the effect of the destructive group is to distort individuality by its ideology of being "disorganised, amoral, thoughtless of consequences, spreading a contagion of emotion, pray to a loss of individuality (homogenization)"⁵.

2. Aspirations and future orientations by Roma children and youth

Adolescents' thoughts about their future are of particular research interest since they influence adolescents' choices and presumably their future attainment. Oyserman and Markus⁶ illustrate that future orientation predicts future behaviour, to the extent of being a protective factor for delinquency. In addition, from the risk and resilience perspective, Werner and Smith⁷ demonstrate that resilient adolescents succeed in developing positive vocational plans, which finally help them overcome adversity.

¹ Sheldon Stryker, "Exploring the Relevance of Social Cognition for the Relationship of Self and Society," in *The Self-Society Dynamic: Cognition, Emotion, and Action*, eds. Judith Howard and Peter L. Callero (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19–41.

² Kay Deaux and Peter Burke, "Bridging identities", *Social Psychology Quarterly* 73 (2010): 315-320.

³ Alicia Fedelina Chávez and Florence Guido-DiBrito, "Race and ethnicity in development", in *An update on adult development theory: New ways of thinking about the life course*, ed. M. Carolyn Clark and Rosemary S. Caffarella (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 42.

⁴ Jean S. Phinney, "Ethnic Identity in Adolescents and Adults: Review of the Research", *Psychological Bulletin* 108 (1990): 499–514.

⁵ Robert D. Hinshelwood, "Ideology and Identity. A Psychoanalytic investigation of a social phenomenon", in *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (2009) 14, 131–148, p. 134.

⁶ Daphna Oyserman and Hazel Markus, "Possible Selves in Balance: Implications for Delinquency", *Journal of Social Issues* 46 (1990): 141- 157.

⁷ Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith, *Overcoming the Odds: High-Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1992).

In contrast to its definition in psychology, where future orientation is related to optimism, self-confidence, positive illusions and other personality characteristics, the sociological approach looks at future orientation in relation to adult attainment, while focusing mainly on educational and occupational goals. It distinguishes aspirations and expectations. Aspirations are defined as idealistic goals for future attainment, whereas expectations stand for the possible or realistic outcomes that the individual elaborates.¹ Future orientation is a complex and multidimensional construct, that results from a process in which attitudes and assumptions based on previous experience on roles and capabilities play a large part.² Beal³ identifies available opportunities and socio-economic status as important demographic variables that, besides personal characteristics and abilities narrow the aspirations of adolescents. Seginer⁴ emphasizes the role of individual's past and present social environment in shaping his future orientation, as well as the role of the macro system, encompassing the social and political structures within the society. Similarly, Shelley⁵ argues that although micro-systems, such as family or school have an important impact on adolescents' future orientation, one's social class, cultural orientation or access to economic resources and opportunities are important to be accounted while developing research on how adolescents envisage their future.

Drawing on the idea of aspirations as a wide range of desired future outcomes, which eventually are restricted, Gottfredson⁶ shows the role of experiences gained by adolescents that will eventually narrow their range of aspirations. According to this, in the case of the Roma youth, their life and school experiences narrow the educational and career aspirations of Roma youth. We presume that their ethnic identity which includes some of the negative descriptors attributed to them by the dominant group, increases the difficulty of Roma youth to develop future education and career aspirations⁷. Negative identifications associated with experiences of being exposed to discrimination, to stereotyping and having little or no recognition of their capabilities, often described in previous research on educational status of the Roma⁸ are reflected in reduced aspirations and expectations for career development, which is detrimental for their involvement in school related activities. Not even the specially funded programs designated to equalize

¹ Sarah Beal, "The Development of Future Orientation: Underpinnings and Related Constructs." (Theses, Dissertations, and Student Research: Department of Psychology, 2011).

² Debra Lorna Shelly, "An Investigation into the Future Orientation of Indigent Culturally Diverse Urban Adolescents" (Dissertation for degree of Master of Diaconiology, University of South Africa, 2010).

³ Beal "The Development of Future Orientation: Underpinnings and Related Constructs."

⁴ Rachel Seginer, *Future Orientation: Developmental and Ecological Perspectives* (New York: Springer, 2009).

⁵ Shelley, "An Investigation into the Future Orientation of Indigent Culturally Diverse Urban Adolescents."

⁶ Linda S. Gottfredson, "Circumscription and Compromise: A Developmental Theory of Occupational Aspirations", *Journal of Counselling Psychology* 28 (1981): 545- 579.

⁷ Roth Maria and Moisa Florin, "The right to education of Roma children in Romania: European policies and Romanian practices", *International Journal of Children's rights* (2011): 127-148.

⁸ Enikő Vincze and Hajnalka Harabula, "Attitudes Toward Schooling And Ethnic Identification in the Case of Roma from Romania", in *Social Ecology of School Success*, ed. Maria Roth, Diana Dămean, Lorena Văetiși, and Csaba Dégi (Cluj Napoca: Cluj University Press, 2010), 175-193.

chances of the young Roma and desegregate their education were able to bring the expected changes in the number of youngsters to participate at higher levels of education and involved in career development programs. Our research aims to contribute to understanding why in spite of optimistic and politically correct policies, results are still scarce. In the field of Romanian Roma adolescents' aspirations, we acknowledge the contribution made by Vincze,¹ in the comparative study of ethnic differences in identity formation and future aspirations of urban Roma youth. The study identified that the school settings and educational policies reinforce the dominant discourse in society with regard to Roma ethnicity, maintaining power inequalities and the status-quo of the Roma status, despite individual exceptions.

3. Objectives, methods and sample

Our research is looking at the elements of Roma minority ethnic identity formation that are marked by the negative characteristics associated to it by stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination and how these influence the individual aspirations and future orientations of Roma children and adolescents. Based on the testimonials collected from Roma youth, the aim of the present study is to understand the resources and barriers that adolescents identify as influencing their occupational aspiration. We look at the identity construction process from the individual's perspective, in our case Roma adolescents at the point of completing their high school education, while trying to investigate the vulnerabilities they are faced with and the influence of others in shaping their identity and subsequently their future orientation, namely their career aspirations.

In our analysis, we followed three directions: (1) how do Roma children view themselves in relation with the others; (2) how do adolescents perceive their identity; (3) how do they describe their occupational aspirations, what resources and respectively what barriers are they faced with in occupational aspirations' attainment and (4) is their reality reflected in a traumatic way, or does ecologic normality resolve in adaptation processes that deepen the gap between Roma minority and the others' way of life. We use the concept of ecologic normality in the sense of the ecological system theory² to explain that certain behaviour might be adequate for a specific environment and might be completely irrelevant and dis-adaptive for another environment. In our case, we suggest that when understanding vulnerable Roma children and adolescents' narratives the reader has to keep in mind their context of life, which might have shaped their adaptive mechanisms accordingly.

In the following section we look at testimonials collected 1. By discussing with children aged 9-15 years old, out of school, during a group interview on the occasion of a meeting of children with a volunteer whom they previously knew for joint educational or entertainment activities³; 2. Revisit 22 interviews with Romanian Roma high school adolescents (12 boys and 10 girls) of Roma ethnicity living in the North-Western region

¹ Enikő Vincze, *Ethnic Differences in Education in Romania: Community Study* (Budapest: Center for Policy Studies, Central European University, 2010).

² Urie Brofenbrenner, *"The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979)

³ Data collected by one of the authors, Sergiu Raiu

of Romania¹; and 3. Look at visual material like pictures drawn by Roma children and photos taken on the landfill. Participants in the interviews were selected using snowball method, by asking children to invite their friends to join.

For the data collection from high-schoolers, all participants attended urban schools, while 13 had urban place of residence and 9 in the rural area. Adolescents were aged 16-18, and were in the 10th, 11th or 12th grade, in technological fields of study (forestry, industry, services, and technical profiles). The interviews were conducted in the period March 2012- June 2012. In order to respond to ethical requirements, we asked for informed consent from the participants for publishing anonymous fragments of their testimonials. We informed the adolescents on the purpose of the research, the procedures of the research, risks and benefits, voluntary nature of the research participation, the participants' right to stop the research at any point and the procedures used to protect confidentiality. About 45 minutes of interview time was collected with each adolescent, using the tape recorder as the source of data gathering. For issues of confidentiality and anonymity, we will use pseudonyms while referring to all our participants. On analysing the interviews, by following the major themes of our research, we reviewed the interviews separately until we identified the common domains emerging from the data.

The children and adolescents who participated in the group interview live in the area of the garbage dump nearby Cluj-Napoca, which has several settlements with different degrees of deprivation and communities living mostly separated. A summer day spent there, by the author SR, alongside the Roma children who wanted to cool down around the nearby lake resulted in many testimonials on children's and adolescents' lives. Conversations were winded around the questions of self perceptions, perceptions of others and discrimination, future plans and personal resources. As introduction, the interviewer asked: *I would like to know you if you don't mind; can you tell me something about you? Something that you think is important, what you like and you do not like; what do you wish for?* The fragments presented below were translated by the interviewer to present the messages of the interviewees as accurate as possible.

4. Children's and adolescents' testimonials

Dreams and opportunities

As all other children, they are open to suggestions, and wish to become loved and respected. In Pata-Rât we met children who considered going to school as the characteristic that distinguishes good, from bad behaviour, as their pastor told them.

"I want to be repented, to play and go to school, and I am starting school in September. I like to write and draw and paint." (Alexandra, 7, female, Pata-Rât).

Alexandra's testimony shows that families and children from this remote Roma community were prepared for schooling by the locally active repentant pastor, and invited to join the religious community under his direction. Continuing the way of life of their family is an important wish for teenage girls. Their future is painted with the traditional colours of Roma women's lives, helping their mother with the younger brothers, and later having their own family and being good mothers.

"I like helping my mother, wash, take care of my brothers, my nephews, my father, my mother ...I like playing with girls and boys, with everybody. I wish to marry a

¹ Data collected by one of the authors, Florina Pop, in the frame of her PhD research.

lad and have a child with him and care for him, not to forget about him, so he does not get angry with his mother and father.” (Cosmina, female, 17, Pata-Rât).

Another teenage girl seems to follow the local pastor’s advice and take a different path, which should keep her away from early child birth.

“I like helping my mother, but I wish to be a repentant. Because I like to be with God. This means to sit next to God, so that one does not swear, not tell foolish things and not have a lover.” (Gerda, female, 14, Pata-Rât).

Roma children’s career dreams do not differ from other children’s dreams. Seven years old Alexandra and ten years old Gabriela, want to become a physician, thirteen years old Aurel wants to be a shepherd to take care of animals, eight years old David wishes to become a policeman, and 10 years old Adi, wishes to become a well-known, important person:

“I want to finish school, go to high-school and when I shall be big I want to become a physician, to save people. When they have a fever, they should come to me, to heal them.” (Aurel, 13, male, Pata-Rât).

“Since primary school I started dreaming of becoming someone” (Adi, male, 16, high-school, Bistrița).

At a higher education level, some of the Roma adolescents met in the high-schools envisioned getting a high school graduation diploma as their short-term plan. They consider passing the graduation examination as decisive in shaping their future career plans, and they describe different career plans, depending on the results of the final examination.

In terms of achieving their short-term goals, like passing the high school graduation examination or attending university, adolescents discussed the importance of their personal characteristics, abilities and strengths in achieving occupational goals. Participants considered that these characteristics are most relevant in the context of the learning process at school

in regard to their assignments and tasks for the graduation examination.

“I really want to graduate from high school and then go to college. Meanwhile, I want to have a job.” (Cristi, 15, male, high-school, Bistrița).

Self-confidence

Cristi has a goal, but he is also aware that he faces lots of obstacles. He describes that he thinks of himself as strong enough to obtain his own resources, in spite of the scarcity of the environments he lives in.

To start with, I think I would work just for the money, so I could pay for college: as a sales person or anything else. I would like to start a project. For instance, to help Roma children go to kindergarten or just help the needy. There are older people that do not have a place to stay, their families just send them to nursing homes. I think this is my dream. There are a lot of people who settle with graduating 8 classes, but I want to become someone, to show people that a Roma can also become a kindergarten teacher or can work somewhere higher.” (Natalia, 17, female, high-school, Bihor)

The great majority of Roma adolescents described their occupational aspirations as highly influenced by their financial status, which, on the one hand, reduces the quality of their study for their graduation examination, and on the other hand, determines their decision to choose labour instead of prolonging education. They consider that they lack the necessary financial resources to provide for tutoring, whereas this is a common practice among their colleagues. The issue of transportation money was also a common

issue raised by the participants. The majority report having financial difficulties and thus at times not being able to attend school due to lack of money. The decision to continue their studies or to find a job after they graduate is considered as problematic for the majority of them, even for those who are in high-school, because of the financial costs of attending university, as the financial support provided through some educational measures is insufficient. Participants use the word “dream” while discussing their occupational aspirations, but they differentiate between their dream and what they consider as achievable for them. They state that eventually, choosing one occupation or another is a matter of choosing among the options that are available to them. Although some adolescents identify resources for following their occupational goals, it is again financial issues, like the need to provide for one’s family, which hamper their access to the desired educational and subsequently occupational path.

“I don’t know if I will succeed. I hope I will. It’s difficult. It’s not about the tuition money for the university, or about not becoming a state-funded student, because this year I participated at the national Olympic contest for Romani language and earned the first place. They have told me that because of this I can become a state-funded student at any university. Considering this, you would think it is easy. But it’s not, when, coming from our communities, you start to blend in, see this better world, compared to what you leave at home. And you tend to stay here, but you can’t do this so easily, the roots are too deep and it all very much depends on what happens at home. You can’t do this because you know what you leave behind. The normal thing would be to do it, sacrifice a few years and then go back and do a greater good. But it depends from case to case. I, for example, have my doubts. I don’t know if I will continue my studies because I have to find a job. I could work here, in Romania, I could manage, but I can’t do this because my parents wouldn’t. This is why I can’t stay and study in Cluj, while my family lacks the wherewithal. I might go and work abroad and send them money. In what concerns a career, I would love to become a lawyer. I really want to study and become a lawyer.” (Maria, 18, female, high-school, Cluj)

Family influences

The issue of family’s influence in shaping adolescents’ occupational aspirations and perception of occupational attainment emerged in many of the interviews. For children already in high-schools, family was the source of motivation, their inspiration and resource:

“For my mother, my education and me finding a good job...this means a lot to her (...) And that motivates me a great deal.” (Tania, 17, female, high-school, Bihor)

The issue of family’s influence in shaping adolescents’ occupational aspirations and perception of occupational attainment emerged in all the interviews. The majority of the Roma adolescents described their families and especially their parents as a source of support, encouraging them to take a career which would eventually provide them with a higher social position than the majority of their family’s members. The adolescents’ perception is that parents advise them to follow the career path adolescents have chosen and that they make a series of sacrifices in this respect, like financial loans. However, we could sense an overall awareness of scarcity of resources and barriers that might impede on their chances. It seems like the understanding of their parents’ vision on the adolescents’ future depends on obstacles due to the fact that they are Roma. When they talk about loans to invest in career education, an option often advertised in the media,

they are aware that due to their ethnic origin their family would not be offered loans. Most of the participants state that seeing their parents work so hard and struggle so much motivates them to achieve more in terms of education and labour and, in result, to be able to help them.

“Since primary school I started dreaming of becoming someone. I did not consider myself as being very smart, but looking at my mother who only finished the eighth grade having difficulties in finding a job and then working so hard for so little money, that motivated me. She is always pushing me: go, do that, study! And that motivates me a great deal.” (Tania, 17, female, high-school, Bihor)

Support people and inclusion

Besides family influences, participants indicate a series of persons who they believe influenced them in deciding upon their future career. About half of our participants state that they met these influential persons for their career choice in the school setting, among their teachers or school counsellors.

“I like to learn. I like to hear about planes, deers, and sheep. I talked with my teacher about what I want to be ...” (Aurel, 9, male, Pata-Rât, attending special school).

We will refer to this aspect as school models, encompassing persons in the school setting who are identified as models and their influence on adolescents' occupational aspirations and one's perception of occupational attainment. One adolescent describes her kindergarten teacher as the person in school who stood very close to her and determined her and her mother to grow fond of school and to have faith in the possibility of a future career, which she now imagines as becoming a kindergarten teacher. Another adolescent talked about the teacher in the tailoring courses and the fact that this teacher advised her to become more confident in her abilities and skills, while the other teachers treated her as an outsider because of her ethnicity. The other adolescents described the school counsellors or other teachers in their school as determining their choice for a career path, in their view. It is important to mention that adolescents' choice for a role model in the school context was described in a context where a great share of their teachers and colleagues discriminated them, while the teacher adolescents chose as a role model proves to be tolerant towards their ethnic background. The adolescents who did not identify a person in the school context as influential for their career choice mentioned the need for teachers to offer a model of ethnic tolerance for students, or in one adolescent's words:

“If teachers do not stop calling us names, neither will the students” (Gabriel, 17, male, Satu Mare).

Participants also identified as important for their career decisions persons who are not part of their family or school setting, such as friends, neighbourhood and nongovernmental organizations. Five of our participants perceived that their career choice was determined by their relationship with counsellors or mentors, while taking part in support programs developed by nongovernmental organizations. These relationships were perceived as supportive for adolescents and extremely necessary, especially because they participated in these programs at times when they felt they were extremely vulnerable and at risk of making the wrong choices for their future. Other adolescents mentioned friends or neighbours as key persons who determined their career choices.

“I had a mentor, God rest his soul! He died two years ago. He was also a Roma. This was during the time my father was in jail. He was an old man, around 60.

From him I learned about my rights and he enrolled me in a support program for Roma youth. He was my role model. I think I want to have a job, become someone and be well seen by everyone.” (Ovidiu, 18, male, Bistrița-Năsăud).

The critical philosophy of children and adolescents

Adolescents' and children's testimonials are impregnated with their efforts to make sense of their realities. Their philosophy is full of concrete life experiences and represents an attempt to understand and to get understanding for their way of life. They perceive the conflicts around them and have a developed critical view:

”My name is Fernando, I am 14. I do not like (to live) like this. I am worried, and sad, do you understand me? I do not have a good house to stay, and a job to work, to have my own money and to buy food. Here (he lives in the community on the Garbage Dump) I had problems with my eyes, when I was younger one of my eyes was shot out with a sling by another boy. I cannot see at all with one of my eyes, but I see a little with the other. And I have no chance to stay in a proper place. My mother is poor, my father is a drunk, and my brothers often shout and yell at him. How others are treating me? Well, sometimes they fight, other times they get along, you understand?” (Fernando, 14, male, Pata-Rât).

Some teenagers, like Fernando feel superior to the community he is living in, and at the age of 14 he wishes to change it.

”Here are so many Gypsies; I was raised among Romanians, in the countryside, not here. I heard one can work here, but it is not true. I did not grow up here, not among the Gypsies, therefore I do not like it here so much among the Gypsies. Some consider me dumb or fool; why? I am like this, I would like if children spoke nicer to each other, and if they did not curse; here people do not say good morning to each other; I mean when people pass by each other, they go by without a word; when evening comes, they should say hello and if children are around they should teach them, you understand? not to curse.” (Fernando, 14, male, Pata-Rât).

Identity and experiences of discrimination

For some of those living in the closed Roma communities from Pata-Rât (on the garbage dump), it is an adventure to be in the same place with people from the majority, even if this does not depend on financial resources. On his way to the free swimming pool close to the garbage dump, Cătă observed some non-Roma people who were already there enjoying the free cool lake and the sun:

”We are not going there anymore. Look how fat they are! They do not¹ let us there. They are Romanians. Will not let us! (Why would the Romanians not allow you to go there?). I am a Gypsy... they do not let me...they do not allow us, they say we bear illness, and they bring police on us.” (Cătă, male, 9, Pata-Rât). Visibly frightened, Anto (10, male, Pata-Rât) stayed behind and added: *”They shouldn't beat us!”*

Some children are fearful, suspicious or mistrustful with the majority in spite of attending schools with other children. When asked how they feel they are treated in schools, and how their relations with their colleagues are, most of them mention conflicting relationships and feeling discriminated.

¹ will not allow

“Badly. They hit me at school when I write; they fight a lot.” (Aurel, 9, male, Pata-Rât, special school).

“My class mates envy me because I play with my best friend, and they push me down to the ground. If I want to play with them too, they do not play with me, they are envious because we are friends.” (Gabriela, 10, female, primary school, Pata-Rât).

On this remote garbage dump area, different groups have stayed for longer or shorter periods, so their previous histories as well as their sense of ownership of the landfill are different. The relationships between these Roma communities are often tensed, which is transmitted also to the children, so fighting and conflicts are common accompaniments of life:

“Do you want to play with her too? Don’t, because she will bring the dog on us. I like better to play here, because in Dallas all children are bad, they steal money from other children. Children here are not fighting with me, and I can play with them.” (Aurel, 9, male, Pata-Rât, special school).

Positioned on a higher social status, high-school students are able to turn discrimination in a motivation to succeed:

“Nowadays it is very important to have a diploma because Roma are very badly seen in society.” (Dorin, 18, male, Satu-Mare).

While referring to the transition to the labour market, Roma adolescents describe their personal characteristics as less influencing their transition, while the majority of them acknowledge that becoming employed and therefore, achieving one’s occupational aspirations ultimately depends on:

“whether the employer gets by the fact that I am Roma and would like to get to know me better.” (Remus, 16, male, Maramureş).

According to their testimonies, ethnic discrimination is reported as a barrier in describing one’s occupational aspirations and subsequently perception of one’s aspirations attainment. In this respect, all participants expressed their concern of not being able to become employed, despite their educational attainment and professional skills.

“My ethnicity would be a problem when looking for a job. I don’t know if the employer would accept me. Maybe some of them will not want to meet me. Just like in school, when children, before getting to know me, would make judgments. After they got to know me, there were no more problems.” (Larisa, 17, female, Sălaj)

“...if you have an educational diploma, they think more of you. This is my only chance to get a good job, earn some money and help my family.” (Dorin, 18, male, Satu-Mare)

Despite the fact that all adolescents named discrimination as the most significant barrier standing in the way of their occupational aspirations attainment, they also hoped that their high school and afterwards their university graduation diploma would protect them from employers’ social prejudices against Roma.

Housing conditions

Children did not talk much about their housing situation, but we had seen some of their drawings. A psychologist or a teacher that would look at the drawings would tell that children have not yet acquired the minimal graphic representations of such simple forms as a house, a road, a tree or flowery gardens. In fact, many of children’s drawings are just realistic. They draw the barren hills, roofless houses, and rarely use colours, neither do

they draw the sun that is so often present in other children's drawings. Andreea's home is in the modules built by the mayor's office when 56 Roma families were relocated from the inner city to the garbage dump in Pata-Rât. She is 9 and lives in a 16 square meters single room with her parents and brothers (no kitchen), using the common toilet, shared with other four families in one of the match boxes she drew. The thin walls do not protect her family from the cold weather, and there is no road from the hills to the establishment.



Children playing at the landfill



More complex, the drawing of Rafael shows that on the top of the hill there are actually two rows of dwellings, exactly 10 match boxes, 3 trees and 2 of the families even have cars. The surrounding small huts represent the other Roma communities of the area. Rafael did not forget the packs of dogs, that threaten children in this environment, or the garbage dump, where grown-ups and children work all day long to recycle.



4. Discussions

Children's testimonials are impregnated by the burden of their exposure to poverty, often violent and insecure environments, improper housing conditions and the lack of financial resources, and their experiences of discrimination. Listening to them clarifies what it means to be part of the ostracized Roma ethnicity and how large the existing gap of chances really is in spite of the antidiscrimination laws and the equal access social policies of the recent years.

Roma children and adolescents view themselves differently compared to non-Roma persons. Depending on their position and age they see themselves more or less exposed to threats coming from the non-Roma. Those in the remote Roma community often express fears of violence, although they also mention that violence is threatening them in their own communities, too. All the same, Roma children and adolescents also wish for help from support people outside their community and are grateful when they get it.

Looking at identity formation from Phynney's point of view, who considered ethnic identity of dominant groups against that of minority groups,¹ Roma children's

¹ Jean S. Phinney, "Ethnic Identity in Adolescents and Adults: Review of the Research", *Psychological Bulletin* 108 (1990): 499–514.

testimonials go in the direction that they feel subordinated to the majority population. We agree with this author that in the future both groups have to reflect on their own position of being either dominant or subordinated and reduce chances of discriminating and being discriminated.

As for the future orientation of the interviewed children, Roma children and teenagers do not seem to lack aspirations or imagination in career planning. Some girls are marked by traditional family models, and some testimonials showed that teenagers lack options for the future, especially when they were aware of their disadvantages. On the other side, several others were also aware of their capabilities and were committed to school. Although some high-school students talked about the discrimination they expect in the future employment, testimonials also showed that the main resource they had was self-confidence in their own personality, but they were not equipped with information on where and how they can get social and legal help. Perhaps acknowledging this finding could open new paths to social programs oriented to career development of Roma youth.

Children who shared their experiences with the interviewers seemed capable of responding to the challenges of their environment in an age appropriate way. Attached to their families, they were capable to talk about violent experiences and hardships. Their reluctance to surpass the frontiers of their own community is an effect of their traumatic experiences with police and other officials, but also non-Roma adults and peers, but they are capable of forming trustful relationships with school-mates, teachers, professionals, volunteers and other friendly visitors.

Conclusions

Our data collected from the interviewed children and teens did not confirm Hinshelwood's¹ suggestion that being part of a marginalized and disadvantaged group necessarily has a destructive effect on the identity formation of its young people. High-school students and even most of the children living on the garbage dump proved to be aware of their needs, to believe in their individual strength and own capabilities, to be sometimes critical and to see the barriers they are faced with and accept help when offered.

Testimonials only partly confirmed what Gottfredson² affirmed about negative experiences of marginalized adolescents – that will eventually narrow their range of aspirations – and largely showed that Roma adolescents who get support from families, social programs or mentors are perseverant in wanting to overcome poverty and discrimination. Others who are not so lucky to have support are still hoping for it, and are open to suggestions, whether it comes from religious backgrounds, charity or human rights based programs.

The interviewed children were ready to share experiences and showed how much similar they are with other children. Although we assumed they will show more negative emotions and cautiousness, or be more family oriented and preserve status-quo, many of the children and adolescents who talked to us saw opportunities to improve

¹ Hinshelwood, "Ideology and Identity. A psychoanalytic investigation of a social phenomena"

² Gottfredson, "Circumscription and Compromise: A Developmental Theory of Occupational Aspirations".

social status starting with career orientation. They wanted to improve their own status, and change family trajectories by their own efforts, taking advantage of the chances they got with the help of families or mentors.



Our research has hopefully contributed to the understanding of the consequences of insufficient social policy measures to address the segregation of Roma in socially deprived housing areas and to improve the employment chances and work conditions of Roma people. Though such measures can contribute to the survival of poor Roma families, and sometimes they allow access to higher education, they leave a large unstructured space where discrimination and the lack of resources can easily annihilate all the efforts to end marginalization made by social programs, by the Roma families, by volunteers and most importantly by the children themselves to integrate in the mainstream society.