

# Chapter 14

## “I Felt I Arrived Home”: The Minority Trajectory of Mobility for First-in-Family Hungarian Roma Graduates



Judit Durst and Ábel Bereményi

**Abstract** This chapter explores the upward social mobility trajectories, and the corollary prices of them for those 45, first-in-family college educated Roma in Hungary who come from socially disadvantaged and marginalised family and community background. We argue that among the academically high-achieving participants of our study the most common upward mobility trajectory, contrary to the common belief of assimilation, is their distinctive minority mobility path which leads to their selective acculturation into the majority society. This distinctive incorporation into the mainstream is close to what the related academic scholarship calls the ‘minority culture of mobility’. The three main elements of this distinct mobility trajectory among the Roma are (1) The construction of a Roma middle class identity that takes belonging to the Roma community as a source of pride, in contrast of the widespread racial stereotypes in Hungary (and all over Europe) that are closely tied to the perception of Roma as a member of the underclass, (2) The creation of grass-roots ethnic (Roma) organizations and (3) The practice of giving back to their people of origin that relegate many Roma professionals to a particular segment of the labour market, in jobs to help communities in need. However, we argue that in the case of the Hungarian Roma, these elements of the minority culture of mobility did not serve the purpose of their economic mobility as the original concepts (Neckerman et al. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22(6):945–965, 1999) posits, but to mitigate the price of changing social class and to make sense of the hardship of their social ascension.

**Keywords** Educational mobility · Social mobility trajectories · Hungarian Roma middle class identity · Selective acculturation · Ethnic capital · Minority culture of mobility

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## Introduction

This is it! This is why I wanted to be born a Gypsy!<sup>1</sup> To belong to a nation that does not belong anywhere but feels at home everywhere in the world. . . It's awesome. The curiosity of a child, the creative thinking, the fraternity, the love for children, the respect for the elderly. . . That's how we are. And you know why? From never being accepted. Had we never been destitute, or never been persecuted, or if there had never been these preconceptions that we lie, steal, cheat and stink, we would never have gotten to where we are. As it is, everything we do, we do to be loved and accepted. (Franciska Farkas, a well-known Hungarian Roma actress in her play 'Letter to Brad Pitt', based on her own life).

My work is not comfortable for many people. Because I do not want to promote us as exotic beings and very different from you. No. I'm saying, "Hey, we are like you in many ways. But we didn't have your chances." I, as a Roma artist, would like to be in the repertoires of the mainstream theatres. I do not want to be with the specials. I do not want to have my work only in Roma Days and Diversity Days. (Alina Serban, award-winning actress, a first-in-family graduate from the British Royal Academy of Drama, born in Romania).

These are excerpts from some of the written material of the exhibition of the project 'Roma Heroes—II. International Roma Storytelling Festival'—a work designed and implemented by the Independent Theatre (IT) group in Hungary whose aim was not only to give Roma artists, actors and directors the power of self-representation, by constructing and telling their own stories, but also to introduce to the wide public role models, everyday heroes, successful Roma as they can be the inspirational forces to advance the socially and economically disadvantaged Roma communities all over Europe. The founder and leader of IT, himself one of the interviewees in our study, shares with us his philosophy behind the idea of the Roma Heroes project this way: 'I myself, being the first Roma actor and director in my poor rural community of origin, was influenced by the fact that the leader of my Drama College in Budapest was a Roma man. He made me believe that if he could do this, I can do it too. I do not need to be an obedient actor, I can also get into a leadership position, even if I am a Roma. I can be a fighter, fighting against racial subordination that permeates the society where I live. A fighter or a hero knows that although there are adversarial circumstances, he can still make changes in his life, in the interest of his wider community of origin. . . We know well the structural problems and the adversaries, not only our everyday lives but many researches remind us of them. But we try to make changes. And these successful Roma role models inspire us and we can follow their examples'.

The Roma Hero project, parallel with many anthropological studies on poor Roma communities, aim at changing the "narrative of victimhood" (Bíró et al.

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout the text we use both the 'Gypsy' ('cigány') and the 'Roma' categories denoting our respondents' ethnicity, accordingly to their own wordings, as they used it during our interviews with them. Although we acknowledge that women of Roma origin in the academic sphere call themselves 'Romnia' and as 'Romani Women' using words from the Romani language (Brooks 2012); and we are also fully aware that 'Gypsy' can be a degrading or 'dirty word' and has negative connotation for many Roma people (Oprea 2012), especially for the educated ones, we thought it crucial to speak about our study group of Roma by using their own terms from their narratives.

2013) to emphasise the role of agency even in adverse circumstances of structural racial subordination. Our chapter is embedded in this “everyday heroes” narrative. Strikingly, the “hero” or the “fighter” metaphor came up in many of our interviewees’ narration about their personal biography and thereof the road to their academic success. (See for similar result Papp (2017) on first generation Hungarian minority students in Carpathian Ruthenia).

This chapter aims to tell the story of social ascension of the first-in-family Hungarian Roma graduates, focusing on their various upward mobility paths, along with their concomitant ‘prices’ (Friedman 2014), ‘emotional cost’ (Reay 2005, Reay et al. 2009), ‘psychological strain’ (Neckerman et al. 1999), or in an umbrella term: the ‘hidden costs’ (Cole and Omari 2003) of their social climbing. The focus is on outlining the characteristics of one particular mobility trajectory, the one that is most common in our study and what we call ‘Roma minority mobility trajectory’. Many of them have constructed a double rooted, Hungarian Roma middle class identity by making up a distinctive incorporation into the mainstream society that is close to what the academic scholarship calls the ‘minority culture of mobility’ (Neckerman et al. 1999; Vallejo 2012; Shahrokni 2015). We interrogate this concept, by exploring the ‘Hungarian Roma variation’ of it. We show that unlike the original thesis suggested for minority groups in similar structural positions, that is, being underrepresented in higher education, and facing severe prejudice and discrimination as a group for reasons of race alone (for the Roma students in Hungary see especially Szalai 2013, Kertesi and Kézdi 2008, and Hajdú et al. 2014), Roma college-educated people in Hungary use the minority cultural repertoires and strategies not to achieve educational and socio-economic mobility but to mitigate the price of it by making sense of their hardship throughout the process of their social ascension (Naudet 2018).

In the following we outline and systematically analyse the personal experiences of upward social mobility attained by the academic high achievement of college graduated Roma who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, in Hungary. Almost one-fifth of the non-Roma Hungarians possess a university degree, meanwhile only 3.3 per cent of Roma have graduated from a higher education institution (Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO) 2011). The scholarly jargon calls these Roma ‘resilient students’ (Máté 2015; Ceglédi 2012; Patakfalvy-Czirják et al. 2019) emphasising their achievement despite stalled mobility and decreased fluidity in post-socialist Hungary (Szelényi and Tóth 2019; Róbert 2001, 2019; Zolnay 2016), and against all social stressors, that is, structural hindrances, be it institutional racism, poverty of their family of origin, or in some cases the counter-ideology or “oppositional culture” (Fordham and Ogbu 1986) of their community of origin that de-values formal educational attainment.

The article will be structured in the following way. First, we delineate the theoretical framework this article is embedded in. Second, we describe the setting of our study, its design and methodology. Then, by closely analysing the narratives of our Roma graduate interviewees, we briefly show their various upward mobility trajectories, and those conditions that they commonly reflected upon as aided their high educational attainment. We place particular emphasis here on the role of

mobilisation of ethnic capital during the process of social ascension as it appeared a crucial mobility aiding factor in many of our interviews. Finally, we focus our attention on the most common mobility path among them that we call the ‘Roma minority mobility trajectory’ that resembles what is named the ‘minority culture of mobility’ in the academic literature. Here we identify the three main elements of this trajectory, and explore how all of these practices help our upwardly mobile study participants mitigate the price of their changing class; and also, how it leads them to a selective way of acculturation, or in other words ‘accommodation without assimilation’ (Gibson 1988) into the mainstream society.

### **Theoretical Framework Ethnicity and Educational Mobility, Its ‘Hidden Cost’ and the ‘Minority Culture of Mobility’**

Interrogating how race and class, and especially how their intersecting effects influence educational opportunity for socially disadvantaged minority students has long been an interest of educational researchers. Firstly, most studies from a cultural-ecological perspective concentrated on the case of African American students who ‘made it against the odds’: despite the disproportionately poorer overall educational achievement of their co-ethnics when compared to the ‘Whites’ (non-African American) college-going rate (Horvat and Antonio 1999; Ogbu 1991). Sociologists notably suggested that not only race but also class and especially its intersection with ethno-racial inequalities has a decisive part in shaping social mobility experiences of minority students. Further contributions introduced within group differentiation, and an intersectional perspective.

In Britain, the educational achievement and aspirations of children from ethnic minority groups has also long been a concern for both academics and policy makers (Modood 2004). However, recent studies have shed light on the variations in the educational attainment of different ethnic minority groups, and the role of mobilising ‘ethnic capital’ in ameliorating social class disadvantage (Shah et al. 2010).

These studies had drawn on Zhou (2005)’s conceptualisation of ethnic capital, that for her is defined as social capital (social ties) that ethnic group members possess by their belonging to an ethnic community. According to Zhou, Chinese families in the U.S., even with low socio-economic status (where parents had low educational credentials), managed to aid their children (second generation immigrants) on the road to educational mobility, despite their little ‘human capital’ which hindered them to directly help their children with their homework. One of the reasons behind these children’s educational success was the support of ethnic community. This community, through its organisations, and by their members of higher socio-economic status instilled (mobility) values and expectations in children of poorer families and offered them support and the enforcement of shared norms and behaviour.

In this chapter, beyond this ‘ethnic capital’ thesis that suggests to consider cases when ethnicity can be seen as social capital, we also build on Yosso’s (2005) critical race theory approach which, complemented by the social capital conceptualisation (Stanton-Salazar 2004; Bereményi and Carrasco 2017; Lukács and Dávid 2018), has recently been utilised in researches in Hungary explaining successful Roma higher education path (Óhidy 2016). Yosso, by exploring the educational success of People of Colour (as she calls the visible minority groups, often stigmatised by race), suggests shifting the research lens away from a deficit view of their communities “as places full of cultural poverty disadvantages”, and instead focuses on... “the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalised groups that often go unrecognised” (Yosso 2005, p. 69). This ‘deficit view’ has long characterised the works of sociologists exploring the socio-economic circumstances of the Roma population in Hungary (see e.g. Kemény 2005, Ladányi and Szelényi 2006); in contrast to cultural anthropologists who shed light on the cultural wealth of their studied communities (Stewart 1997; Bereményi and Carrasco 2017; Kovai 2017).

Although academics, along with many school professionals and activists celebrate the positive consequences of educational mobility and school success, a growing scholarship on high-achieving minority youth draw attention to ‘the price of the ticket’ (Friedman 2016): the complex and multifaceted effects and the ‘emotional costs’ (Reay 2005) or psychological strain of social ascension. Those who study the experiences of upwardly mobile individuals coming from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, stepping into the elite, whose trajectory is characterised by a huge range of social ascension, agree that independent from the particular national context, there is generally a tension between these people’s background of origin and their attained class (Naudet 2018). According to Naudet, this tension originates from the situation typical for many upwardly mobile people from poor families, when the norms and values of one’s background of origin do not coincide with the norms and values of the attained social group. This, in extreme cases, can lead to alienation, mental suffering (Sorokin 1959) or the feeling of ‘in-betweenness’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Friedman 2016) which upwardly mobile people struggle with as not being able to belong to any of the two (background of origin and the attained middle class) groups they identify with. Bourdieu even speaks of a ‘habitus clivé’ in his autobiography (Bourdieu 2008, cited by Friedman 2016), indicating a ‘dislocated habitus’ or a ‘divided loyalty’ (Lehmann 2007) between one’s background of origin and attained class. In the same line of thinking, Cole and Omari (2003) speak about the ‘hidden costs of upward mobility.’

Other scholars (e.g. Carter 2006), however, emphasise the capacity of people in situations of upward mobility in handling the difference between their preliminary (in family and in the community of origin) and secondary (in college and in the attained middle class) socialisation. They call the upwardly mobile ‘cultural navigators’ or ‘cultural straddlers’ who understand the values of both dominant and non-dominant cultures and embrace skills for participating in both cultural environments. These in-betweeners, or in Hungarian, ‘lebegők’ (Tóth 2005, 2008; Mendi 1999; Bokrétás et al. 2007; Forray 2004), are ‘flexible negotiators of cultures’

(Devine 2009) who actively exercise their agency towards school teachers, peers and family members.

Neckerman et al. (1999), by aiming to take into consideration the effect of ethnicity on the price of upward mobility, suggest the evolvment of a distinctive “minority culture of mobility” in the context of discrimination and group disadvantage. They argue that stigmatised minorities such as African Americans in the United States in the situation of upward mobility face distinctive problems that accompany their minority middle class status. One class of their problems arises from their frequent contact with the white majority, which is accompanied by the feeling of discrimination, of not being recognised as bona fide members of the middle class. This is what Cose (1993) called the “permanent vulnerability of one’s status” in the case of the Black middle class in America. The reason behind this vulnerability is that black middle-class people frequently encounter white strangers in public spaces (on bus, in shops, etc.) where white tends to assume that all black strangers are lower class and respond accordingly: with fear, insult or threat.

Neckerman et al. note, that another race-related injury of those changing class is them “being the only minority in a white dominated setting. . .and the exaggerated visibility of [them being] the token” which can also mean a “psychological burden of loneliness” (ibid 1999, p. 950).

The second type of distinctive problems for underrepresented minority college educated professionals stems from their frequent interclass contacts within the minority group of their background of origin by keeping up relations with their poor extended families. To overcome these problems, the minority middle class can turn to their ethnic social ties as a resource and deploy a ‘minority culture of mobility’ by mobilising the socio-cultural repertoire of their ethnic community (Shahrokni 2015; Naudet 2018) and by setting up their ethnic organisations (Vallejo 2012). This enables them to culturally navigate in an unfamiliar and sometimes hostile social field and to straddle both worlds, in their background of origin and in their destination class. Further on, we will argue that upwardly mobile first-in-family graduate Roma interviewees, similar to other stigmatised minority groups, deploy some of the social practices and cultural repertoires of this so-called ‘minority culture of mobility’. In this chapter, we will apply the concept of “minority mobility trajectory”, in order to avoid the overloaded ambivalent connotation of “culture” in the case of Roma.

In what follows, after delineating our research setting and methodology, we outline the different upward mobility trajectories of our Roma interviewees, and argue that the most common path among our research participants is what we call ‘minority mobility trajectory’. A salient element of this path is the mobilisation of ethnic capital, as a natural response to cope with the ordeal and price of social ascension for those who come from a stigmatised minority, as the ‘minority culture of mobility’ thesis predicts. We will interrogate how this trajectory manifests in the life of our Roma graduate respondents, what the main elements of it are, and how, contrary to the established belief, it leads the majority of them not to assimilation, but to a distinctive incorporation into the mainstream society.

## Roma Educational Mobility and Its Outcome: Assimilation or Selective Acculturation?

Despite the expanding higher education sector in Europe, and in contrast with the high academic achievement of some immigrant minority groups, students who belong to Roma groups, are still characterised by low participation in higher education. The scarce data on Roma's access to colleges and universities indicate a significant discrepancy when compared to non-Roma. In the mainstream population around 30% of the population has a college degree (OECD 2014, p. 44). In contrast, the 2011 UNDP Roma Survey which is the very few data set providing multi-country statistical data on education attainment of Roma in Eastern and South-eastern Europe showed that only 1% of those identified as Roma in these countries have postsecondary education (FRA & UNDP 2012). This low participation has not considerably changed despite the commitment of the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015) and the European Framework for national Roma strategies until 2020 to improve educational opportunities for Roma, partly by affirmative programs and by establishing pro-Roma ethnic organisations, and the Roma Education Fund (Brüggemann 2014). As a recent study by Garaz and Torotcoi (2017) reveals, it is not only that Roma in this region are underrepresented in colleges and universities, but also that they do so in the STEM fields of study (science, technology, engineering, mathematics). At the same time, Roma are overrepresented in humanities and art. Garaz and Torotcoi argue that this segmentation of the choice of study has the potential to negatively impact their competitiveness in the job market after graduation.

In the field of Romani studies, as to the outcome of educational mobility of Roma first-in-family graduate, on the one hand, there is a line of sociological research that adopts the ‘canonical’ straight-line assimilation theory developed by Gordon (for a summary, see Prieto-Flores 2009). Explaining the success of some immigrant groups in the United States, Gordon (1964) suggested that those groups who successfully adopt the dominant culture, subscribe to its norms and begin to look less different, that is, those who assimilate into mainstream society, will be able to achieve upward socio-economic mobility by losing the significance of their ethnicity.

Following this line of thinking, some scholars assert that Roma identity is highly vulnerable to upward mobility. Bárány (1998, 2002), on the basis of the census data on Roma in Slovakia, describes how Roma people lose their identity and try to assimilate into the mainstream society when they enter higher education and get white-collar jobs. According to Bárány, the only Roma people who maintain their identity would be those who form what he calls the Romani Intelligentsia. He suggests that the main reason for them to keep their identity is their individual political aspirations and interests. By the same logic, Robert Koulis (2005) argues that self-ascription through a Romani identity in Hungary decreases relative to an



increase in educational and economic opportunities.<sup>2</sup> Torkos (2005) has also found in her doctoral research that Roma graduates in Hungary typically assimilate.

On the other hand, many Roma and non-Roma researchers have pointed out that even successful people maintain their Roma identity (Kóczé 2010; Bíró et al. 2013; Tóth 2008). Studies on successful school trajectories among Roma university students in different European countries (Brüggemann 2014; Bereményi and Carrasco 2015, 2017; Kende 2005, 2007; Mendi 1999; Óhidy 2016; Máté 2015; Székelyi et al. 2005) are, however, mainly occupied with questions around identity conflict for high achieving Roma and not with the outcomes of their educational mobility in regards to how they incorporated into the mainstream society through their labour market position (for a few exception see Székelyi et al. 2005; Durst et al. 2016).

Prieto-Flores (2009) suggests that there is not enough reliable and significant data to confirm the existence of only one type of assimilation or acculturation process or the lack of it for Roma people who are in the situation of upward mobility. Drawing on the result of a UNDP survey carried out in five Central and Eastern European countries among their Roma populations, he shows how statistical data contradict the long-held assumption (Bárány 1998, 2002; Koulis 2005) that those with more education are more likely to assimilate into mainstream society. According to this data, there seems to be no connection between education and ethnicity. That is, being university educated does not affect whether people identify themselves as Roma or not. Therefore, he proposes that the Roma people can follow an assimilationist trajectory, or alternatively can maintain Roma identity important. Therefore, he argues drawing on Portes and Zhou's (1993) idea about the segmented assimilation of second-generation immigrants in the United States, a 'segmented theoretical framework of acculturation, assimilation and [upward] mobility would be needed,' in the case of Roma people (Prieto-Flores 2009, p. 1394).

The ambition of this chapter is to fill this need through outlining the most common upward educational mobility trajectories among our Roma college-educated respondents through systematically analysing their narratives of social ascension. We argue in line with the growing scholarship exploring the personal experiences of upwardly mobile, stigmatised, ethno-racial minorities, that many Roma first-in-family university graduate developed a minority-specific experience of social rising (Neckerman et al. 1999; Vallejo 2012; Prieto-Flores 2009; Shahrokni 2015; Nyíró and Durst 2018).

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<sup>2</sup>He based this conclusion on the result of his survey during which he followed Ladányi and Szélenyi's (2006) methodological suggestion by using an oversample of 150 'people called Roma' (in Hungarian: *cigánynak nevezett emberek*", Szuhay 2001), being selected with the help of a group of experts. This way of sampling is a big limitation of the validity of his results.



## The Research Study and Its Methodology

The data presented here are part of a larger research project that explores different educational mobility trajectories, their outcomes and effect on the life and subjective well-being of 120, academically high-achieving, first-in-family Roma and non-Roma graduates in Hungary. For the purpose of this chapter, we use data only from 45, purposively selected Roma interviews of this project who followed a distinct minority mobility path. We considered our interviewees as Roma on the basis of their self-ascription, that is, according to their self-identification, which is particularly important in the case of those who are children of an ethnically mixed couple.

We conducted semi-structured, narrative in-depth life course interviews (each lasted between 1 and 2.5 h) with all participants of our study. The interviews had been collected over a 2-year period, across Hungary, either in the home or work environment of our respondents. All of them were recorded, transcribed, de-identified to ensure anonymity, and analysed with the aid of Atlas.ti 8.0 software.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. We used different channels to find our interviewees in order to decrease sampling bias, therefore we searched for respondents in the researcher's own personal networks, in generic Roma and pro-Roma institutions, and through the online media (Facebook advertisement). We also used purposive sampling and a general inductive approach (Thomas 2006), by re-visiting some interviewees from our previous research (Durst et al. 2014). The high number of interviews was necessary to identify and compare various educational mobility trajectories, in terms of the range and the speed of upward mobility (Friedman 2014). As to identifying the range of mobility of our respondents, we compared their attained social and spatial position (their educational and labour market attainment, and residence) with that of their parents. We used this dimension of analysis to differentiate between interviewees whose parents already achieved a certain level of upward mobility (we considered these interviewees to attain short-range mobility compared to their parents), and those whose parents did not (these interviewees had long-range mobility compared to their parents). The speed of the mobility in our case refers to whether our respondents' educational carrier was interrupted or unilinear (uninterrupted). The variations of interviewees according to the range of their social ascension enabled us to identify various types of mobility trajectories and their different effect on our respondents' life and well-being (which we call the 'different price of mobility').

We also resorted to our networks established during our previous Roma migration research project to reach out for the 'invisible', educationally high achieving Roma who could only imagine their social betterment through geographical mobility and by 'assimilating' into the mainstream host society. One of the limitations of our research is, however, similar to many studies on successful Roma, that despite all our effort, we still missed those fully assimilated Roma whose aim is not to be noticed as belonging to this stigmatised group in order to be able to melt into the Hungarian society.

Out of the 45 respondents of our study, 20 were men, 25 women. 80% of them came from rural settlements. Three quarter of them studied humanities subject at universities, and accordingly, they work on the special segment of the labour market as teachers, NGO project workers, lawyers, and social researchers dealing with “Roma issues” (see Nyíró and Durst 2018).

We believe that understanding the various trajectories of educational mobility and their outcomes, be it the hidden costs of mobility or the mode of incorporation into the mainstream society, for the high achieving Roma is a very complex topic which requires the use of qualitative methods, namely, narrative interviews and personal biographies. As Naudet (2018) suggests, creating a self-narrative of a success (or the lack of it)—the main material interviews offer to the researchers—can never claim to be objective, because of the risk of the imperfection of memory, the potential attempt of reconstructing the past, the inevitable strategies of the interviewee to present himself in a better light and to make sense of all his ordeal. However, for sociologists, goes on Naudet, social facts are not limited to social practices but include discourses. “While discourse is never objective, it can be objectified. . . As Bernard Lahire (2011) says, using Bourdieu’s famous words, there exists an ‘objectivity of the subjective’, and discourse, however subjective it may be, remains an indicator of objective structures. . . There are objective structures of thought, perception, evaluation, belief. . . as these are expressed in actions or practices” (Naudet 2018, p. 26).

## Discussion

### *Different Mobility Trajectories of Roma Graduates and Conditions Behind Their Success*

On the basis of the narratives of our respondents we identified at least three different modes of incorporation into the Hungarian middle class among first-in-family college educated Roma. The first one which was the rarest in our sample is the well-known assimilationist mobility model. We only encountered one interviewee in our sample who openly spoke of assimilation strategy<sup>3</sup> of this type:

I came here to England to work in a school as a teacher. They know me at the school as a Hungarian woman. . . I live my own individual life, feeling grateful though to everybody who helped me to get my degree. Sometimes I feel that my old friends feel indignant at me

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<sup>3</sup>We are aware of the limitations of our study that (1) it is not representative of the Roma college educated in Hungary, and (2) even if it was a research on the first-generation graduates in Hungary, we did not manage to reach those first-in-family college educated Roma who wanted to fully melt into the mainstream. We only know of this group from the narratives of our Roma interviewees. One of them, Lola spoke about this type from her own university experience: “I met a Gypsy girl at the uni. I knew from the first sight that she was Gypsy. But she said to me that although her parents were Gypsy, she prefers to disown to be a Gypsy. In this case she will not be discriminated, she will be no differentiated. She did not even want to open up towards me. . .

for not working for Roma issues. . . It is not right, is it, to live your life having left behind the Roma? But I’m good with my life now as it is.

The second type of upward mobility model was of those Roma professionals who incorporated into the private sector of the Hungarian labour market as cosmopolitan experts and citizens. Lajos’s self-description epitomises this group’s characteristics:

I am a man, a father, a private company’s manager and by the way, Roma. . . But in 2019, when the threat of global warming is the most important challenge of our globalised world, who cares, out of the 7 billion people that I am accidentally a Roma?

The third and most typical mobility model in our sample is that of the ‘distinct Roma minority mobility’ trajectory, the focus of this chapter. But before we turn our attention to its main elements and characteristics, we briefly outline the most important, common conditions of educational mobility that our respondents reflected upon, independent on which trajectory they followed.

Almost all our interviewees considered their “persistence”, “fighter personality” and “inner desire to study” as the main factors behind their educational success (see also Forray 2004, 2014; Varga 2017), therefore supporting the myth of meritocracy (Naudet 2018). Nevertheless, after careful analysis of their narratives, the role of the opportunity structure available to them at a particular historical context, also, that of the protective agents, along with the part played by their family and micro community (see also Kóczé 2010) in the complex and often contingent story of social mobility, was salient. Success factors have been widely investigated among academically high-achieving Roma. Non-segregated neighbourhood, parents’ social and labour market integration, integrated school environment, ethnically mixed groups with non-Roma peers, children-focused pedagogy, protective / caring tutors and school-teachers, inclusive, respectful school culture that ensures supportive and smooth relationship between parents and school staff, economic aid or scholarships, mentoring/career guidance professionals, sheltering pro-Roma support groups as well as resilience developed by Roma students are among the most relevant conditions that positively effect—even if not determine—the emergence of successful educational trajectories. Most of these aspects are also present in the international literature on social mobility through educational success. Nevertheless, our focus in this chapter is not on these success facilitating factors, but rather on those features that make “Roma minority trajectory of mobility” distinctive from that of their non-Roma peers.

### ***“I Am Still a Gypsy but in a Different Way”: The Roma Minority Trajectory of Mobility***

While our upwardly mobile Roma respondents’ academic success can be seen as a testimony of them managed to adjust (to an extent) to their new white middle class social milieus’ codes, partly with the navigational help of the above-mentioned pro-Roma ethnic organisations, our data show that the majority of them still

maintained a set of embodied dispositions ingrained through their primary socialisation in their community of origin. Academic literature calls this way of incorporation (selective) ‘acculturation’ (Gans 2007) in the case of immigrant ethnic minority groups who merge many elements of the cultural repertoire of their attained middle class with some of the values of their background of origin. This merging process became possible to be explored by our research method, the discourse analysis of our interviewees’ narratives of personal biographies.

As Naudet (2018) explains, drawing on Ricoeur (1992), discourse is the space where the ‘narrative identity’ is displayed and allows the person in a situation of upward social mobility to make sense of all the difficulties they have experienced. Narrative identity involves “a necessary transformation of the self, a rearrangement of one’s original dispositions, a social hybridization, and an acculturation to new system of action and perception. Mobility in fact raises with particular keenness, the question of identity, the issues of the changing, variable nature of identity, and its permanency over time. The question that individual in a situation of social mobility is faced with is: how do I stay the same while being different?” (Naudet 2018, p. 13).

With our research method, by analysing personal biographies and narrative identities, we became aware of the prevalence of an evolving minority mobility trajectory among our Roma middle class respondents. We identified three main elements of this distinct trajectory which resembles in many aspects to what Neckerman et al. (1999) called the minority culture of mobility in the case of Black middle-class people.

Minority Middle Class Identity First, there is the construction of a Roma minority middle class identity. Here, following Archer’s argument, we use the concept of middle-classness as a relational formation (Wacquant 1991). “That is, middle-class identities can be understood as produced in... reaction to working-class identities, essentially epitomize and embody all that is not working class” (Savage 2000; cited by Archer 2011, p. 135). As Archer (2011, p. 148) suggests, the minority ethnic middle-classes who occupy a distinctive structural position at the intersection of class privilege and racial subordination, produce their identity in line with their uneasy relation to the ‘authentic’, white middle-classness, where many feel excluded from and not recognised by, due to racist readings of their minority ethnic belonging.

One part of this minority middle class identity is the feeling of “having a foot in two different worlds” (Friedman 2016). Although a few of our interviewees have recounted being “torn by contradiction and internal division” as Bourdieu (2008) suggested on the basis of his own personal experience of ‘divided habitus’ as a price of his huge range of upward mobility, the big majority of our Roma participants reported developing a ‘bridging’ personality or a ‘straddling between two worlds’ (Carter 2006) habitus instead. Janó’s self-ascription epitomises this biculturalism (see also Tóth 2008; Boros 2019):

I am a bicultural, dual rooted man. This does not cause me any tension anymore. Instead, I take it as a pleasant journey between two cultures [his background of origin and attained class]. All of [my college-educated] Roma acquaintances [in similar position] recounted identity crises at one point in their life, mainly when they were at university being the only

Roma student there. But thanks to the influence of the first Roma intellectuals from the 1980s, the Roma community has awakened to its self-worth. There has been an Enlightening in the Roma [professional] circle, a change in what it means to be Roma. There is a common belief now that it's not only the non-Roma's [Hungarian] culture that has value but the Roma, too. (Janó, 43 year-old man, a social science researcher)

This bicultural, straddling incorporation strategy to the mainstream society can also be called, using Gibson's (1988) notion as "accommodation without assimilation". Like Gibson's Sikh immigrants in the United States, Roma first-in-family college graduates validate their accommodation of demands of white-dominant arenas such as educational institutions as a necessity to social mobility, however as such that need not jeopardize one's private, ethnic identity. Lola summarised this practice the following way:

We [Roma graduates] will never fully melt into the Hungarian society. 'Cos we do not have a shared history [with non-Roma Hungarian], we have our own tradition, our own customs... We only learnt to live together with the Hungarian. Our parents here in the village adopted many of the Hungarian's norms and values to make easier to live together with them and to advance in life... They left their different language, their way of dressing. They started to speak Hungarian at the local grocery shops and at school... But at home, behind the four walls, we are still Gypsies in our way of speech, our customs, and in our values. (Lola, 23, a rural elementary school teacher).

However, for many of them, this easiness of who they are after they have changed so much during their social ascension, was the result of an identity re-construction process, nurtured by their educational mobility, through their like-minded peer group and importantly by the Roma support organisations, initiatives and other mobility aiding pro-Roma grassroots associations. Jola's reply to our question what it means for her to be Roma, is a testimony of this reconstruction process:

In our region, Gypsy is one who queues in front of the post office [waiting for her child benefit and other social grants], who hangs around at the pub, who sweeps on the street in his phosphorescent yellow west [the uniform for public workers], and who is black. So, if I say in my neighbourhood that I am a Gypsy, then people associate me with these images, and they are confused... In olden times my Romaness to me was something to be ashamed of. But not anymore! Absolutely not. Nowadays, I have a positive self-esteem, and I was happy when my daughter kept her family name even after her getting married to a non-Roma man to show the world what one can achieve in life if one is Gypsy and wants to study (Jola, 45, social worker and teacher, lives in a small rural town).

Another element of this Roma middle class identity is the self-perception and the feeling of responsibility that comes with it, of our Roma respondents as them being the 'Race Man' or 'Race Woman' (Neckerman et al. 1999). The below two excerpts epitomise this identity characteristics of those who followed this Roma minority mobility trajectory:

The fact that I started to deal with Roma issues, was accidental. I was drifted to the Roma issues as I was needed the most there. But now I believe that it was my predestined path. I know that my responsibility is much bigger than it would be if I were not Roma. As a Roma woman, wherever I serve, I have to stand up in the name of the Roma people. Whether I want it or not, they consider me as a Roma woman, a Roma expert. I would like to be just another human being, but I know that during these times [when the Roma still experience social

disadvantage and discrimination], I cannot afford to do that. This is a big burden on my shoulder. (Anita, 40, social scientist and a voluntary youth worker).

I have an inner drive, a compulsion, to spread the knowledge that I acquired. I know that I can help even just with my example, just for being there [in the public sphere as an educated Roma]. . . I believe that everyone who comes from a minority group, has this compulsive proving themselves. (Gábor, 42, linguist).

## Creating Ethnic Organisations

The second characteristics of this distinctive Roma minority mobility trajectory is that many of our respondents joined or formed ethnic minority organisations as we have explored elsewhere (Nyíró and Durst 2018, see also Kállai 2014). These all started as grassroots initiatives by some members of the “Big generation” (active before and during the democratic transition) and also by some younger Roma intellectuals, a few of them internationally renowned academics by now. One of the previous directors of Romaversitas (Romver as its members call it), an “invisible” dormitory for talented Roma students having completed their first year of university course, recalls the beginning this way:

During the mid-1990s, when the doors had slowly started to open to universities, for not only the elite, top students, there was an opportunity to talented Roma youth whom finished secondary school to carry on with further education. Here in Budapest there were a few dozens of them, who got entry into various universities, coming from rural settlements. They have been hanging around in the capital, de-rooted, knowing nobody. They did not have any community that could hold them, they did not know any Roma youth in a similar situation, and they had serious financial difficulties. . . Then came the Soros Foundation and gave these students stipends. But what is even more important, these young Roma university students started to create their alternative places in the city, they started to build a community from scratches. That was the time when some Roma and non-Roma intellectuals came up with the idea that an ‘invisible dormitory’ should be created for these Roma university students. So, this was a grassroots initiative. . . From the academic school year of 2004-2005, when they had abolished entry exams to universities in Hungary, and A-level exams became the condition for entry to higher education, there was a big opening [for educational mobility]. Since then Roma and non-Roma Youth from socially disadvantaged families have started to get into universities in bigger number. . . The peak was in 2009 when we had 200 Roma applicants for 14 places in Romaversitas.

Similarly to Romver, the establishment of the other important mobility aiding ethnic institutions, the ‘Christian Roma Collegium Network’ in 2011, as a result of the collaboration between four churches and the support of the Hungarian government (Lukács and Dávid 2018), was also partly a result of grassroots initiatives, at least according to some of its first members: “The whole Roma Collegium Movement started at around 2004. At that time, it was an informal community of Roma youth. We got to know each other through a university entry preparation course to be held in Budapest. We all came from rural settlements, and we got the support of a private donor paying our accommodation and travel cost, and a foundation covering our entry preparation course fee. . . We made friendships during the 8-month weekend course, and we started to come together regularly to discuss public issues. [ . . . ] Our motivation was how we can manage to further study and at the same time, how we can help the advancement of our people. . . [ . . . ] the first year of university was very bad, very difficult. We needed a community of people in similar situation that can hold us. It was always refreshing when I met this informal group of Roma students once a month. . . It was

many years before the Christian Roma Collegium Network was institutionalised” (Lali, 34, a former leader of one of these special Roma collegiums that function as dormitories besides providing financial and educational support for its students).

These narratives sharply demonstrate that young first-in-family university students are not only passive recipients of social capital but can be active social agents, and generator of new resources, relationship and norms and can actively contribute to re-construct and re-define their ethnicity (Shah et al. 2010).

These abovementioned ethnic organisations did not only help our interviewees overcome their constant financial difficulties (by giving them stipend) and the structural barriers that underrepresented minority students face in a higher education environment (by empowering them with navigational capital in the circumstances of racial discrimination). They also provided them a place to meet with like-minded Roma peers, creating close friendships and dense ethnic networks and by this, a feeling of belonging and an emotional shelter (Lukács and Dávid 2018; Nyíró and Durst 2018). By this, they contributed to mitigate the price of their upward mobility, through reducing the psychological and emotional cost of changing class.

My time in Romver was one of my best periods in life. It was wonderful. What did I get from that community? I got love, encouragement, the sense of self-worth and self-pride, solidarity and self-belief. That is everything that makes somebody a human, enable one to feel good in this world. Thanks to that period, I think I will never feel bad about myself anymore. (Béla., 41, journalist).

### Giving Back to the Community

Finally, the third element of this distinctive Roma minority mobility trajectory is that most of our respondents have concentrated on the segments of the labour market where they can help marginalised people, or people in need, or their own community in marginal positions.<sup>4</sup> That is, where they can give something back to the community (Nyíró and Durst 2018). Piroška’s story illustrates this element clearly:

As my knowledge has developed, as I started to understand the situation of the Roma, I became more devoted to serve my community, to return something. At the beginning I found it difficult to be a token Gypsy. I was the Gypsy woman who looked nice on the camera, who had to be showcased. I would have protested against it if I could’ve done, to say that I want to be shown not because I am Gypsy but because I am clever... But after a while I came to understand that this was important. And I took up this Gypsy token [díszcigány] role. I realised that I was in the position that people listened to me more, that I could change lives. . . Some of my students have realised that if it is not degrading for me to identify myself as a Gypsy than this is not that horrible for them either. . . I say to them I am still a Gypsy but in a different way. (Piroška, 56, a university teacher).

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<sup>4</sup>However, this tendency seems to be changing with the younger generation of current Roma university students. As a previous leader of one of the Christian Roma Colleges asserted in our interview, they have nowadays a couple of students of economics, law and information technology courses as “Roma Youth also want to have occupations with market value that would pay the bill”.



For the majority of our interviewees, resorting to these three elements (social practices and cultural repertoires) of the distinctive Roma minority mobility trajectory, contributed to the mitigation of the price of their social ascension. There seems to be a subgroup of them, however, where the range and the speed of their upward mobility was so ‘brutal’ as one of them put it, or so high; and the social distance between their background community of origin and their attained (non-Roma Hungarian) middle class was so big that they still have not yet managed to reconcile their belonging to two different worlds. However, even for them, giving back to their community of origin was a life-long aspiration as early as from secondary school. Their pain comes from the fact that despite their desire to help advance the Roma as a group, they feel neglected and not recognised by their own ethnic community. They are still convinced though that their task is to take up a “bridging role” between the two worlds (their Roma background of origin and their non-Roma middle class attained group), to help their people. One of them, a pastor and an academic researcher, coming from a traditional, rural Vlach Gypsy community where he, “against the odds”, managed to lift from poverty through studying and partaking in Higher Education as a vehicle for upward social mobility, put it this way:

I still feel, despite all the non-recognition, that my role is a bridging role. . . I could rather manage to make changes in the way of thinking of the non-Roma (Hungarians) than in the Roma’s—because to change the Roma’s mindset, is a very tough job. At least I did not manage in my own community. . . When I go back to my village, I see everybody is busy, working in the construction industry, making their own businesses and earning good money with their 8 years of schooling. . . They do not understand me, we are not at the same intellectual level. Nobody is interested back at home in my opinion. . . It is sad. When I was a child, I wanted to be the Martin Luther King of the Roma. . . Now I feel I could do the most [out of my knowledge] if I got a university teaching job. My affinity is to work with young intellectuals, that’s when I would feel home. . . I believe that the Roma intellectuals should be given more space and more recognition in higher education. . . I think most of us, Roma intellectuals, who had ascended from poverty, we think that we will do something for our community, to return something back. We feel we have to be the lantern [to show the way]. The non-Roma, when would they do anything for their community? They go for self-realisation, they will become lawyers, economists. But for us, the community is important. Because our community is looked down, stigmatised. And we feel we will show them that if we can do it they can do it, too. . . . But even if I feel I made a brutal jump [on the social ladder], I do not see they like me more, they praise me. . . They [his community in his home village] did not even make a party for my celebration when I got my PhD degree. . . (Pali, 38, a researcher in an academic institute, from a rural Vlach Gypsy community).

## Conclusion

Our research study on first-in-family college graduate Roma from socially disadvantaged families outlined different social mobility trajectories, common conditions behind educational success, and the different ‘prices’ (emotional costs) of changing social class. We argued that the vast majority of our respondents, as in the academic literature on under-represented minority middle classes in the higher education

sector suggests (Neckerman et al. 1999), resorted to a distinctive Roma minority mobility path. They did it in response to their distinctive problems, that is, being minority and middle class, “located at the intersection between class privilege and racial subordination” (Archer 2011, p. 134).

We identified three main characteristics of this minority mobility trajectory. The first one is the construction of a bicultural Roma middle-class identity, in which not only the Hungarian but also the Roma culture has value. This identity is characterised by double rootedness, to overcome the uneasiness from estrangement from the community of origin by their accusation of Roma academically high achieving individuals of ‘becoming Hungarian’ through further studying at university level. The second element of this distinct mobility path is the creation of and participation in ethnic associations and pro-Roma support programs that serve as a buffer against some of their status anxiety or cultural dislocation and which could ease the pain of the ‘divided habitus’ (Bourdieu 2008; Friedman 2016) that many of our participants recounted as having to struggle with at least at one point in their upwardly mobile life course. Related to this mobility model, the third element is the social practice of giving back to the community of origin, and the segmentation on the labour market in jobs relegated to help people in need.

We also showed how the mobilisation of ethnic capital (Shah et al. 2010; Zhou 2005) or of ‘community cultural wealth’ (Yosso 2005) not only facilitated educational mobility of our Roma graduates but also, it contributed to mitigate the reported psychological costs of their social ascension. This is a question that has not yet been, to our knowledge, raised in mobility studies in Hungary. We believe that by outlining the social factors and conditions that led to the alleviation of the (psychological) price of social ascension for the Roma sample of our study, this research project can contribute to raise awareness of what the characteristics of the ‘costless’, or of minimal cost, resilient minority mobility trajectory are, and how the careful mobilisation of ethnic capital and ethnic community cultural wealth can support the formation of a strong Roma middle class in Hungary, even under confining social constraints and hindrances.

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