

## Constructing choice biographies: aspirational pathways and educational choices of young Roma migrants

### Costruire biografie di scelta: percorsi aspirazionali e scelte educative dei giovani migranti rom

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#### Abstract

This article explores the dynamics between aspiration, formation and processes of educational and career choice among young Roma migrants in the United Kingdom, focusing on young people that are carving life and career pathways that diverge from traditional roles in their community. Drawing on empirical data from a research study on lifelong learning, the article theorises youth transitions through the sociology of youth concepts of *normal biographies*, where young people follow pre-established paths; and *choice biographies*, where new, often unprecedented roles are envisioned, such as being the first in the family to pursue higher education. The analysis highlights the transformative potential of aspirations in shaping the educational and professional trajectories of young Roma, while emphasising the crucial role of supportive family and social structures in calibrating these aspirations in response to the broader opportunity structure. The paper offers as well a critical appraisal of the conceptual utility of the distinction between *normal* and *choice biographies*, defining them as dual spaces of reflection encompassing purposeful decision-making and concrete steps toward the realisation of life projects.

**Keywords:** educational choice, youth transitions, Roma youth, minority aspirations.

#### Sommario

Questo articolo esplora l'interazione tra la formazione delle aspirazioni e i processi decisionali in ambito educativo e professionale tra i giovani migranti rom nel Regno Unito, con un focus su coloro che stanno tracciando percorsi di vita e carriera che si discostano dai ruoli tradizionali della comunità. Basandosi su dati empirici provenienti da uno studio sulla formazione permanente, l'articolo teorizza le transizioni giovanili attraverso i concetti della sociologia della gioventù di *biografie normali*, in cui i giovani seguono percorsi predefiniti e *biografie di scelta*, in cui si immaginano in ruoli nuovi e spesso senza precedenti, come ad esempio essere i primi nella famiglia a intraprendere studi universitari. L'analisi mette in luce il potenziale trasformativo delle aspirazioni nel plasmare le traiettorie educative e professionali dei giovani rom, sottolineando al contempo il ruolo cruciale delle strutture familiari e sociali di supporto nel calibrare tali aspirazioni in risposta al ventaglio delle opportunità. L'articolo propone anche una valutazione critica dell'utilità concettuale della distinzione tra *biografie normali* e *biografie di scelta*, definendole come spazi doppi di riflessione che comprendono decisioni intenzionali e passi concreti verso la realizzazione dei progetti di vita.

**Parole chiave:** scelta educativa, transizioni giovanili, giovani rom, aspirazioni delle minoranze.

#### Introduction

This article explores the dynamics between aspiration formation and the processes of educational and career decision-making among young Roma migrants in the UK, focusing on young people that are carving life and career pathways that diverge from traditional family and community roles and associated expectations. The author has conducted research with a Roma community in Coventry over the course of several projects spanning more than a decade. One of these research projects, *Cultural Expressions and Young People's Professional Aspirations (Connect2Aspire)*, involved young Roma who were the first in their families to enrol in higher education. Previous literature has referred to them as the *lucky survivors* (Bourdieu, 1988 in Ball *et al.*, 2002)

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or «the least disadvantaged of the most disadvantaged» (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979, p. 26 in Ball *et al.*, 2002). The development of aspirations and the process of choice that characterises the educational and career pathways of these young people has additional nuance and complexity compared to youngsters their age whose enrolment in higher education is the norm in their families and social circles (Reay *et al.*, 2001). In this paper, these transitions are theorised focusing on distinctions between *normal biographies*, where young people step on well-trodden pathways choosing professional roles performed in their family and community and *choice biographies* (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Furlong, Cartmel and Biggart, 2006; Woodman, 2009) where new professional roles are envisioned, not typical or even absent from their family and community environments – such as Roma youth who are the first to enrol in higher education.

The article unpacks the argument in three parts. Section 1 outlines the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis of aspirations, education, and choice, drawing on key contributions from the sociology of youth and the sociology of education. It situates these theoretical perspectives within the broader agency-structure debate, highlighting the relevance of foundational thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Stephen Ball, and Arjun Appadurai to the study's conceptual approach. Section 2 introduces the study on which this article draws, focusing on the research strand involving young Roma migrants in the United Kingdom. Section 3 outlines the findings of the study and theorises them in the light of sociology of youth and sociology of education scholarship. Du Bois-Reymond's (1998) theory of youth transitions is used to shed light and interpret the decision-making processes of young Roma who seek to forge new life pathways, distinct from those traditionally followed within their communities. At the same time, the paper offers a critical appraisal of the conceptual utility of the distinction between *normal* and *choice biographies*, examining their explanatory power and limitations in the context of young Roma migrants' lived experiences and narratives. Drawing on evidence collected at multiple time points and through different research methods in the *Connect2Aspire* project, the analysis suggests that *normal* and *choice biographies* do not represent fixed life-course categories. Instead, they reflect dynamic and non-linear trajectories alternating reflexive and action dimensions that mark progression from deliberation and choice to the realisation of concrete life projects (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998).

## 1. Aspirations, education and choice

In sociology of youth scholarship, the term *choice biographies* is set against that of *normal biographies* to capture the complexity of agency and choice in life courses that do not follow traditional, linear models for key life transitions. Scholarship attributes the coining of the term to German sociologist Ulrich Beck, often citing his book *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Beck used the terms in the context of discussions regarding agency and structure in contemporary life courses, a manoeuvre which was not deprived of scholarly criticism (McLeod and Yates, 2006). Yet, as Woodman (2009) amply argues, the scholarly use of these concepts was often approximate and taken out of the theoretical context of Beck's sociological thinking. Aware of the rapid developments in contemporary society and the need of sociological thought to keep up, Beck was seeking to come up with new intellectual tools and concepts for the sociological study of contemporary lives. Since being appropriated in sociological scholarship, the concepts of *normal* and *choice biographies* have been used in different ways, often adapted to fit the needs of specific research contexts, rather than attending to some generic or fixed conceptual attributes. For example, they were used as generic monikers to broadly exemplify distinctions between the predictable, linear, life-courses characteristic of the

post-World War II generation versus the modern life courses characterised by multiple options, choices and turns (Woodman, 2009); but also to come up with nuanced characterisations of youth transitions studied through in-depth, longitudinal empirical studies like the Dutch youth study reported by Du Bois-Reymond (1998).

While acknowledging the conceptual ambiguities surrounding them, this paper appropriates the concepts of *normal* and *choice biographies* drawing on the work of Du Bois-Reymond and further shapes them through the analysis of empirical evidence on the experiences of young Roma in transition. The longitudinal study of Dutch youth life courses reported by Du Bois-Reymond (1998) focuses on the non-linear, complex process of choice experienced by young people who are faced with the many options and freedoms of modern life, yet paradoxically compelled to rationalise and justify continuously these choices. By contrast, according to Du Bois-Reymond, young people with *normal biographies* tend to fit the mould set by tradition with respect to their choice of education, profession and family life. To grasp the specificities of youth transition processes, this section outlines a theoretical framework that positions these concepts amongst broader debates on the formation of aspirations and the determination of educational choice, with disciplinary perspectives coming from social anthropology, psychology, sociology, economics and education. The aim is to examine scholarly perspectives on the potential influence of aspirations on sustaining trajectories of change for Roma youth, highlighting the determinants that play out in the formation of aspirations and the role of aspirations in shaping educational choice.

The conceptual approach to aspirations adopted in this study is informed by the work of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2013) and development economist Debraj Ray (2002). For Appadurai, aspirations are understood as cultural capacities, socially embedded and shaped by the values, norms, and imaginaries of specific socio-cultural contexts, influencing individuals' perceptions of what they might feel entitled to aspire to. The poor, for instance, may lack the capacity to aspire because they are conditioned to perceive some social roles or positions as out of their reach. Ray (2002, p. 3) offers further insight into these processes, by unpacking the concept of *aspirations window* – «formed from an individual's cognitive world, her zone of *similar, attainable* individuals». The aspirations window is a zone of inspiration, but also a limiting horizon that conditions the formation of aspirations. A consistent lens found in scholarship on aspirations and educational/occupational attainment looks at the mediating role of aspirations. For example, Sewell, Haller and Portes (1969) argue that educational aspirations function essentially as mediators between the background of the family environment and educational achievement: the influence of the family and close environment is primarily felt in how children first filter the influences that come to bear on their concept of selves and their abilities, and whose examples and role models are accepted as relevant. The latter, in turns, have a cascading effect on educational and then occupational attainment. Of interest in this paper is to delve deeper into the experiences and choices of young people with a minority and ethnic background, or members of underrepresented and disenfranchised groups and communities.

Authors such as John Ogbu, Leslie Gutman, Annette Lareau, Ingrid Schoon and Stephen Ball show the important determination of class, race and social status on the formation of aspirations and educational attainment. Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of *habitus* and *cultural capital* have been influential in aspirations scholarship that highlights sociocultural determination. Children and young people reared in families with high social status, or high to middle-income have higher cultural capital and are more likely to consider access to higher education and higher status professions as standard pathways, attainable, and within reach. Annette Lareau (2018) suggests that in upper and

middle-class environments, parents engage in *concerted cultivation*, attempting to promote the development of skills and attitudes commensurate with visions of the future they aspire their offspring to attain to. This systematic approach to child education and upskilling cultivates children's social habitus in ways that are not afforded in lower income families, thus coming to affect in profound ways children and adolescents' development of aspirations. A nuanced articulation of the concept of *habitus* is offered by the British sociologist of education Stephen Ball, whose work shows how the intersection of factors related to ethnicity/race, class and gender have an important impact on the formation of aspirations and on educational choice, leading to the perpetuation of social inequalities. According to Ball (1997; Ball *et al.*, 2002; and Reay *et al.*, 2001), the process of choice is affected by social and cultural capital that are unequally available and accessed in society. For parents, in particular, school choice is a mode of re-attesting and re-investing in the confirmation or upwards mobility of their social class and position in society. Ball *et al.* (2002, p. 52-53) sketch a theory of educational choice that conflates a «cognitive/performative» register – by which the selection of educational institutions is dictated by student performance; with a «social/cultural» register – which relates to how the agents, parents and students, classify themselves and the institutions they are considering. Thus, the choice of the university is determined by subjective perceptions of class and class distinctions. Drawing on Bourdieu (1986), Ball *et al.* (2002) argue that individuals' *social world* and their *lifestyle* are shaped and conditioned by two characteristics of *habitus*: the ability to generate classifiable practices circumscribed to a class; and the ability to properly assess and distinguish among them. A second dimension in Ball *et al.*'s (2002) theorisation of choice draws on Hodgkinson and Sparkes' (1997) theory of careership, by which choices are made within *horizons for action* that filter the influence of the consequential actors, from parents and the family environment to schools and other significant interactions. These invisible horizons are built over the long-term by education and by meaningful experiences, they both afford and constrain, influencing the agent in subtle but highly consequential ways.

A theory that points to the socio-cultural determination of aspirations corroborated by findings in the present study and which will be referred later in this paper is John Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of school performance (Ogbu, 1979; Ogbu and Simons, 1997). Ogbu (1979) surprised a dynamic related to the educational achievement of minority children and youth that is pivoted on attitudes towards the values and the education model of the host or majority culture. Attitudes of opposition towards mainstream education are associated with lower educational aspirations. This process can be exacerbated by discrimination and perception of unequal opportunities, further reducing aspirations and educational achievement. The position endorsed in this study is mid-ground on the agency-structure scholarly debate, acknowledging the sociocultural determinants but also emphasising the role of individual agency over aspirations and choice, a stance which is well represented in the work of Gutman and Schoon (Gutman and Schoon, 2012; Schoon and Lyons-Amos, 2017; Schoon, 2006; Schoon, 2021). Schoon and Gutman integrate insights from different theoretical traditions, including an acknowledgement of sociocultural factors as well as social psychology dimensions, framed by ecological systems theory, in the work of American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner. Their socio-ecological lens helps to show how aspirations evolve over time, in a dynamic between individual drives and contextualised stimuli and opportunities, first determined by the family and primary social upbringing environment, and further by the school context and wider sociocultural structures. Leslie Gutman and Ingrid Schoon show how individual agency does have a place in the development of aspirations, but shaped considerably by parental influence and family background, significant others and the peer and school

environment. Of special interest for this paper is how they view the formation of aspirations under adverse, challenging conditions. These views are aligned with Sewell, Haller and Portes' (1969) status attainment theory, by which aspirations act as mediators between the family and the social upbringing environment and educational and life outcomes. Moreover, Schoon and Gutman bring a more nuanced perspective, which by incorporating a socio-ecological developmental lens, shows how young people coming from disadvantaged environments can challenge pre-conceptions, develop high aspirations and thrive in their lives and careers by cultivating resilience (Schoon 2006).

## 2. Context and methods

This paper draws on empirical data collected through the research project *Connect2Aspire. Cultural Engagements and Young People's Professional Aspirations*, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (2019-23). The project mapped alternative pathways for supporting interest-based learning and professional orientation for UK young people, particularly young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. One of the project core concerns was to develop rich understandings of the process of developing aspirations in different socio-cultural and economic contexts, with a focus on contexts marked by underrepresentation and disadvantage. To this end, *Connect2Aspire* engaged a diverse cohort of 285 young people from a wide range of socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. One of the project research strands focused on youth interested in creative careers (n=265), recruited through the mediation of the Victoria and Albert Museum (Sabiescu and Zajzon, 2023a). This was followed by a deeper investigation focusing on the experiences of young migrants of Romani ethnic origin living in Coventry. At the time of conducting the research, immediately before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, was a period of intense socio-cultural change and adaptation for the Romani community in Coventry. This study focused on the settled Romani population, speakers of dialects of Romanes, and among these, on first generation migrants of Romanian nationality. The nationally imposed lockdowns to contain the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing hardships, particularly for Roma families who were already living on incomes below the national minimum wage or beneath the poverty line (Hagedorn-Saupe *et al.*, 2015). On the other hand, there were also increasing numbers of Romani families who were in stable employment, or owning a business, and young generations that manifested growing interest in pursuing higher education studies. The Romani community is tightly knit, extremely supportive of newly arrived members, and observing traditional socio-cultural values and norms that structure generational and gender roles. A growing number of community members had begun to embrace change, particularly evident in increased openness toward children's education and more permissive attitudes towards the schooling and employment of Romani girls (Hagedorn-Saupe *et al.*, 2015; Sabiescu, 2018). Such developments cannot be uniformly generalized across the entire community and variations in the adherence to traditional norms and receptiveness to change remain substantial. This complexity necessitates a fine-grained analytical approach, responsive to individual variability and attuned to contextual specificities.

This study adopts an ethnographic methodology, seeking to contextualise the perspectives and experiences of young people within the broader socio-cultural contexts. Due to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, the study was initially conducted remotely, through online interviews from May 2020 to May 2021. As soon as public health regulations permitted, in-person creative research workshops were conducted between June and October 2022. The research design was inductive and iterative, aiming to test

an emerging model of aspirations development through social assemblages (Sabiescu, 2021). The Roma young people were involved in the study through semi-structured interviews and creative aspirations mapping workshops. The interviews and creative workshops protocols were designed based on the aspiration mapping theoretical model, which distinguishes between two stages in developing aspirations – crystallisation and pursuit – and examines the role of communication and social networking in advancing them (Sabiescu, 2021). Overall, 20 young people participated in the study, all of them originally from Romania; 17 of these young people were of Roma ethnic minority. Five Roma youngsters participated in two or more data generation sessions, for an in-depth examination of their developing aspirations. Young people were asked about their information and communication practices, seeking to understand how these underpin the development of professional aspirations. The creative research workshops used participatory photography, zine-making and communicative ecologies mapping to engage young people in a reflexive exploration of their aspirations (Sabiescu, 2023; Sabiescu and Zajzon 2023b). In addition, twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with active professionals in the community, youth and cultural sectors in Coventry, ranging from youth, sports and culture clubs, social care and statutory service providers. Semi-structured interviews with sector professionals explored areas of existing support and unmet needs, while also examining the potential of cross-institutional networks and partnerships to assist young people in cultivating professional aspirations and accessing desired career pathways. Data analysis was conducted through on a hybrid thematic analysis approach (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006), based on a codebook created through a hybrid inductive/deductive approach in syntony with the progression of the theoretical model on aspirations developed as part of the study (Sabiescu, 2021).

### 3. Findings and discussion

This section reports on the findings of this study and discusses them in the light of sociology of youth and sociology of education scholarship, focusing on the dynamic aspiration-choice that drives trajectories of change and upwards social mobility among young Roma. A first, important take away from this study is that youth that can be regarded as trendsetters, pioneers in their Roma community had both a strong life goal – talent, predilection, motivation and/or strong determination to succeed that, while socially shaped, was related to individual agency – and a supportive environment that in this study was shown to be especially important at the level of the family support structure. While these two sets of factors are mutually determining and tightly entangled in the youth experiences analysed, they are treated separately in each of the first two themes below: the first theme tackles youth choice in relation to the concept of *bounded agency* (Evans, 2007); while the second comes as a complementary articulation of the complex context that affords and constrains choice, looking at the role of parental influence – widely acknowledged in previous literature on education and choice, but depicting highly specific characteristics in the context of the migrant Roma community involved in this study. In the second half of this section, findings have been patterned using the concepts of *choice* and *normal biographies*, to open up a broader discussion about the way individual aspirations and the sociocultural context shape choice and prospects of change among Roma youth. The concepts of *choice* and *normal biographies* are used as analytical tools, but also critically analysed, pointing to the need to refine and articulate them more precisely, to unlock their full analytical power.

*Aspirations, choice and bounded agency*

Similar to the focus of the study by Reay *et al.* (2001), concerned with the experiences of «non-traditional applicants to higher education» (p. 855), this research sought to reveal the underlying dynamics of exercising choice in highly constrained environments, dwelling on the experiences of those young people who under less favourable circumstances would have been unlikely to go for a degree, «survivors of a process of class attrition in education» (p. 861). Listening to young Roma talk about their life and career choices, observing them reflect in creative research workshops, the intense deliberative processes characterising youth transitions became obvious, revealing a key pattern in the calibration of aspirations. At one end, aspirations were externally constrained – often abruptly – by rigid norms such as early or arranged marriage, which frequently curtailed educational and professional goals. At the other, some young people adopted a more reflective and self-directed approach, aligning their aspirations with personal aptitudes and long-term life projects. Valuable insights into how aspirations are calibrated during transitions – from envisioned futures to actionable life projects – emerged from one of the creative research methodology workshops that used a communicative ecologies approach (Tacchi, Sabiescu and Gordano, 2019; Sabiescu, 2023). The activity comprised two sessions. In the morning, participants engaged in a card-based exploration of their online and offline interests, often expressing enthusiasm and idealistic career aspirations. The afternoon session, focused on mapping career trajectories, prompted more pragmatic reflections. This shift revealed a contrast between aspirational desires and perceived feasibility. For example, an 18-year-old girl initially expressed a dream of becoming a judge but later revised her goal to becoming a beauty technician. Similarly, a young man maintained his entrepreneurial ambition, though the envisioned business shifted from a football club to a car park. The examples above sustain theoretical perspectives aligned to the work of Evans (2007) and Ball (in Ball *et al.*, 2002, Reay *et al.*, 2001). Evans (2007, pp. 92-93) speaks of «bounded agency», by which agents have «a past and imagined future possibilities, which guide and shape actions in the present, together with subjective perception of the structures they have to negotiate, the social landscapes that affect how they act». In a similar vein, Ball and colleagues suggest that career choices are constrained and afforded by *horizons for action* (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Ball *et al.*, 2002). Decision-making is not solely the outcome of systematic analysis. While stages of rational and structured evaluation may form part of the process, actual decisions often rely, sometimes substantially, on fragmented information encountered within familiar contexts. Thus, horizons for action are contextualised and shaped in families and communities, determined by their structures and the decisions they afford and constrain are «opportunistic, based on fortuitous contacts and experiences» and «only partly rational, being also influenced by feelings and emotions» (Ball *et al.*, 2002, p. 33).

*Parental support structures and the value of education*

The importance of parental support in the development of aspirations and positive bearing on educational achievement is acknowledged by studies going back to the 1960s work of Sewell, Haller and Portes (1969), with important more recent contributions by Stephen Ball (e.g., Ball *et al.*, 2002; Ball and Vincent 1998; Reay *et al.*, 2001), Mookherjee, Ray and Napel (2010), and Byrne and De Tona (2019). This study confirms parental support as a critical determinant in the realization of young people's aspirations, particularly among those pursuing life paths diverging from traditional Roma norms.

Notably, this support was especially influential for youth following choice biographies, such as young women envisioning alternative futures. A key factor appearing to determine the likelihood of parents offering support for higher education pursuit for their offspring was related to the value placed on education by parents themselves and within the family. In many cases, this appeared to be the culmination of a process of change, realisation or acknowledgement. For instance, one young man, married with children, chose to pursue higher education later in life, enrolling in a Business and Management BA at age 26. His account illustrates a transition from short-term priorities to a long-term appreciation of education as a pathway to achievement. In another case, one of the young Roma women engaged in several data generation sessions throughout the project was the first in her family to attend university. Coming from a traditional Romani family, where her father was a well-respected community leader, she had strong parental support to pursue higher education, a shift that was not initially evident. Her older sister, despite academic promise and aspirations to become a paediatrician, was compelled into an arranged marriage at 16, abandoning her educational goals. This experience prompted their parents to reassess their stance on education, ultimately choosing to support their younger daughter in following a different, education-centred path. Theories that look at psycho-social factors affecting parents' choices for their children appear particularly relevant. For example, Ball (1997) argues that parents take decisions by employing «programmes of perception» (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 2) determined by their social, cultural and educational background, which enable them to decode cultural objects such as schools in particular ways. These programmes of perception provide nuance to the process of school choice, going beyond functional interpretations – just a relevant or a convenient school –, and into associations and implications raised by school choice for sustaining or strengthening their own social class and status. John Ogbu's (1979) cultural-ecological theory offers a systemic explanation for the attitude change researched in the Romani community in Coventry. Ogbu claims that the degree of minority educational engagement and attainment reflect the attitudes towards the majority culture. Where change happens, this can be analysed systemically looking at the educational context and student reward and engagement strategies on the one hand, and the internal dynamics of the minority community on the other. This explanation is corroborated by the findings of this study and by earlier research involving the Roma in Coventry conducted by the author (Sabiescu, 2018; 2022), concerned with the factors affecting socio-cultural change. As previously discussed, these changes cannot be generalized; instead, this study sought to delve deeper into subjective accounts and viewpoints of how such change was experienced.

#### *Normal and choice biographies as reflexive and action spaces*

Two features were considered in this research to identify distinctions between normal and choice biographies: the distance taken from patterns of education and profession traditionally embraced in the Romani family, assessed looking at youth education and career plans compared with their parents' and having enrolled or intending to enrol in higher education. Yet, it is important to underline that choice and normal biographies are not fixed labels. These are rather perspectives employed to afford a nuanced analysis of youth transitions compared to the patterns imprinted by tradition in Roma communities. In the process of employing them as analytical tools, they were shaped and refined to unlock their analytical potential but also attend to their inherent limitations. Analysing Roma youth experiences in the light of youth transitions scholarship suggests that choice and normal biographies are lifewide rather than lifelong spaces, pointing to a continuum



rather than discreet, separate categories characterising entire life courses. They are spaces sustained by young people when the conditions are met, and depending on changing circumstances or changing inner drives, youngsters transition between them. They are also both spaces of reflection and of action. As spaces of reflection, choice biographies bear some distinctive characteristics as intensely deliberative, reflexive spaces. Similar to the observation of Reay *et al.* (2001) looking at higher education choice for «non-traditional university entrants» (p. 860), the underlying deliberative process is more complex than the one evident in narratives of choice from peers coming from more privileged backgrounds. Yet the reflexive dimension of choice biographies does not tell the full story, and it is crucially important for research studies to capture transitions into choice biographies as *action spaces*. This is when deliberations are instantiated in concrete plans, where guiding aspirations may signal future directions, but where the role of support structures may become crucial. This is illustrated by a young Roma woman's story that enthusiastically aimed for a choice biography but had to reluctantly return to traditional gender roles shaped by familial expectations. When first interviewed at 18, the young woman aspired to become a police officer. By her early 20s, however, she had abandoned this goal due to her mother's concerns about safety. To meet her mother's expectations, she first considered working as a flight attendant, however her mother thought flying so much was dangerous too. She therefore shifted focus towards less dangerous tourism jobs where she could at least wear a uniform. In the meantime, however, she got married and interrupted her studies so she could get a job to contribute to her new family, when she was missing just one year to graduate from high school. When interviewed, during the Covid-19 pandemic, she was unemployed and her most immediate aim was to find a job amidst the challenging times associated with the lockdown and social distancing rules. Her story illustrates how a strong life aspiration is calibrated in the process of transitioning from reflexive to action spaces for choice biographies, when aspirations are crystallised into life projects, defined by Du Bois-Reymond as follows: «*Projects* are drafts for a desirable future, a future which clearly will never become reality in the way it was planned. The *project* therefore has to be constantly adapted to changing circumstances or abandoned in favour of a new one» (1998, p. 63). In the young woman's story, career aspirations have been shaped over the course of time to align to parental expectations. In this process, realistic possibilities to achieve her ambitions were assessed, marking a transition from hopes and dreams to plans for achievable life projects. During the first interview, becoming a policewoman was a carefully considered future aim. The constraints encountered, the lack of parental support meant that in her early 20s and despite being a bright, promising student, she was close to letting go of her aspirations to become an educated, successful Roma woman.

#### *Claiming «gender-specific» choice biographies*

Du Bois-Reymond (1998) speaks of a *gender-specific normal biography*, where traditional gender roles and behaviours are perpetuated. The analysis of the stories of young women involved in this study through this lens raises important considerations regarding the pervasiveness of traditional gender roles and how they affect the life chances and trajectories of Roma young women. Their narratives suggest that, by contrast, there are multiple ways to claim gender-specific *choice* biographies. A young Roma woman interviewed at 30 years old, twice divorced and a single mother was studying Business Management and wanted to open her own business. She manifested a strong desire for upwards social mobility, aiming to become an independent woman, distancing herself from the traditional values of the Romani family upheld in her family

and community. «I would like to open my own business. To be an independent woman. I am a single mother, and I want my daughter to have a role model, to do – not what I have done – but to do much better than what I have done» (Roma young woman, 30 y.o., participatory photography workshop, September 2022). She was reared in a traditional Romani family, where girls and women had pre-established roles as mothers and housewives. She gave the example of her mother, who was illiterate, because «unfortunately, due to the times back then and her ethnicity, her parents had not allowed her to go to school, because she was a girl» (*ibidem*). She had herself been forced into an early marriage at 17, which she eventually left behind to marry again, this time by choice. After a second failed marriage and with a young child, she had decided to go back to study and train as a businesswoman. This story offers a vivid example of seeking to transition from the mould of the traditional Romani woman role to an independent, educated woman who defies the odds and attends tertiary education despite having to sustain her family as a single mother. Yet, this total break with tradition is not the only way to appropriate choice biographies as a young Roma woman. Some research participants were seeking to position themselves mid-way, trying to combine the role of a mother and housewife with that of an educated, professionally accomplished woman. A young woman in her early 20s had studied art and design and had a one-year-old daughter, living a fulfilled, settled family life. Her plan was to complete her education by studying business management and open a business with her partner. For her, family came first. «We wanted to first achieve our goals as a family, and only after professionally. We considered that it is much more important, when you come home, that there is someone waiting for you, rather than having lots of money and coming home to an empty house» (Roma young woman, 24 y.o., interview, May 2021). She considered herself to be a good leader and was confident that their family plans as a young entrepreneurial couple will succeed. Yet, she did not see herself giving up on motherhood and housewife responsibilities in the future; rather, she saw herself as a helper, a shadow advisor and supporter for her husband, who would lead the business while she would be spending her time at home sustaining the family and the children.

## Conclusion

This article examined the dynamics between aspiration and choice amongst migrant Roma youth who are striving to diverge from traditional roles and life trajectories within Romani communities. The sociology of youth concepts of *choice* and *normal biographies* were used as theoretical lenses for highlighting the underlying deliberation and choice processes that young people face when seeking to do things differently from their parents, from previous generations. By applying these concepts to novel empirical data, both their analytical utility and inherent limitations became apparent. Rather than serving as rigid frameworks for interpreting entire life trajectories, these concepts function more effectively as lenses through which to examine the deliberative processes that characterize pivotal moments of choice. They also represent spaces of both reflection, involving deep introspection and critical evaluation and action, denoting the tangible steps taken toward the pursuit of individual life projects. This was substantiated by engaging young people at various stages of their lives and eliciting in-depth narratives concerning the development and transformation of life goals and aspirations. The sample comprised young Roma men and women who were the first in their families to attend university, as well as young women who, despite aspiring to pursue higher education, were compelled – due to a lack of support – to conform to traditional gender roles.

In examining the dynamics sustaining choice and normal biographies, two factors appeared to be crucial: youth aspirations and parental support. Young people pursuing *choice biographies* often demonstrated strong guiding aims and aspirations. However, the critical role of parental support in shaping and sustaining these aspirations must be acknowledged. The findings align with Ball's concept of the «social dimensions of choice» (Ball *et al.*, 2002, p. 51), emphasizing that choice is a socially embedded process. Parental and sociocultural influences shape young people's horizons for action, subtly yet powerfully informing their concept of self and agency. Just like Evans argues, young people's choices and trajectories are «influenced but not determined by environments» (2007, p. 92-93). Dialogues between the empirical findings and theory suggest that decisions to embrace or resist traditional life course trajectories cannot be adequately accounted for by theoretical models that privilege either agency or structure alone. Instead, the findings support a more integrative framework, one that bridges sociological theories emphasizing structural influence (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2018; Ogbu, 1979) with socio-psychological models like expectancy-value theory (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000), which highlight personal motivation and perceived efficacy. Echoing Gutman and Schoon, this study suggests that aspirations are shaped by multidimensional influences, and while the family and sociocultural background are crucial determinants, personal attributes, agency and motivation are important factors in this process.

This study has implications with respect to areas for intervention and support to encourage educational attainment for young Roma. Of fundamental importance in sustaining the development of aspirations under challenging conditions is cultivating resilience – for instance through supportive scholarly environments and mentorship experiences that can positively affect students' confidence in their abilities to succeed (Schoon, 2006). At the same time, the experiences and views shared by Roma young people, especially young women, suggest that securing parental support is a crucial and needed factor for sustaining educational engagement and achievement by Roma youth. Data suggest that when acknowledging the value of education for strengthening their children's life chances, parents are more prone to support the education of their offspring, including young women, and this can happen even in families that previously held traditional views on social and gender roles for Roma. Thus, any such interventions should consider collective, family-focused approaches rather than purely individual support.

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#### Short Bio

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