

# IDENTITY BUILDING IN THE CONTEXT OF INTER-GENERATIONAL SOCIAL REPRODUCTION: THE VOICES OF TWO ROMANIAN ROMA

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**Rezumat:** În ultimele decenii a existat un număr crescut de dezbateri asupra studiului identității, mulți cercetători considerând identitatea un concept dinamic, care este dificil de măsurat. Studiile calitative, în mod special fenomenologia, ne permit studierea fenomenului identității din perspectiva individului implicat. Folosind analiza fenomenologică, în acest articol prezentăm un studiu bazat pe poveștile de viață a doi adulți vârstnici, de etnie romă. Accentul este pe construcția socială a identității, în contextul reproducerii inter-generaționale a muncii și a educației, considerate ca structuri sociale.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** identitate, reproducere socială, vârstnici de etnie romă

**Abstract:** There has been an increased debate in the last decades around the study of identity, as many scholars considered it a dynamic concept, which can hardly be measured. Qualitative studies and phenomenology especially allows us to study the phenomenon of identity from the involved individual's perspective. Following the roots of phenomenological studies, in this article we present a study based on the life stories of two older adults of Roma ethnicity. Our focus is on the social construction of identity, in the context of inter-generational reproduction of labor and education as social structures.

**Keywords:** identity, social reproduction, older adults of Roma ethnicity

**Résumé:** Dans les dernières décennies, il y a eu une intensification du débat autour de l'étude de l'identité, car de nombreux chercheurs le considéraient comme un concept dynamique, qui peut être difficilement mesuré. Les études qualitatives et la phénoménologie permettent, en particulier, d'étudier le phénomène de l'identité du point de vue de l'individu impliqué. En suivant les bases des études phénoménologiques, dans cet article nous présentons une étude basée sur les récits de vie de deux personnes âgées

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d'origine rom. Notre accent est mis sur la construction sociale de l'identité, dans le contexte de la reproduction intergénérationnelle du travail et de l'éducation en tant que structures sociales.

**Mots-clés:** identité, reproduction sociale, personnes âgées d'origine rom

## 1. Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, there has been an increased interest in the use of different theoretical frameworks in the study of identity. Moreover, identity research led to a different exploration in social sciences that is multidisciplinary, methodologically eclectic and generally postmodern (Callero, 2003). The concept of *self* is mostly approached using symbolic interactionism micro sociological perspective, with language and meanings as core concepts of identity development. Symbolic interactionism stresses the interaction between the individual and specific social structures in the way that the individual internalizes certain social structures, which he then expresses through different behavioral aspects (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). Phenomenology is another micro sociological perspective used in the study of identity and what this perspective holds distinct is the aim of understanding a social phenomenon from the involved person's perspective (Groenwald, 2004). According to O'Leary (2004), phenomenology is based on two major assumptions. The first assumption is that the world is constructed, and people are creative agents in building the social world and the second one implies that the world is intersubjective, in the way that individuals experience the world through and with others. Phenomenon, as the object of phenomenological studies, can be understood only at the junction between individuals and constructs, as the interest is not on the reality of the construct but on the descriptions of lived experience.

In our study, we conduct a phenomenological research and we explore the social construction of identity, along with the social interactions that shape the process of identity construction. Since dealing with Roma ethnics, one study direction that emerges inside the present identity study is the exploration of structures that are socially reproduced. The concept of social reproduction calls for further discussion into issues of stratification and types of reproduced social structures that promote inequalities. The importance of the present study relies in the innovative character of the research and the in depth analysis of identity in relation to the concept of social reproduction in the case of Romanian Roma ethnics.

## 2. Concepts and framework

**The Identity Theory.** In our investigation, the Identity Theory (IT) provides the framework for understanding the social construction of identity within the socializing context. Although developed by several scholars (e.g. Mead, 1934; Turner, 1978; McCall & Simmons, 1978), the IT relies centrally on the work of Sheldon Stryker in 1982 and Peter J. Burke in 1980; their later contributions developed the IT into an analytical framework for the study of identity construction (Stryker, 2000; Stryker, 2006; Burke, 1991; Burke, 2005).

IT describes human behavior in terms of reciprocity between self and society, in the sense that “society shapes self, the self shapes society” (Stryker, 2006: 216) throughout a continuous construction. The influences of the self on society rely in creating groups, networks and institutions and reciprocally the self is influenced by society through language and meanings that enable the individual to engage in social interaction by taking one role or another (Stets & Burke, 2003). Key concepts in the IT are the concepts of *role-based identity* and *salience*. IT asserts that roles that individuals take are central in understanding identity construction, as role-based identity refers to one’s self-verification process as a result of the structural role they take inside a group (Burke, 1980). Therefore, the self reflects social structure to the extent that the self includes several role identities that are assigned by the role positions (Hogg et al., 1995). Society influences individual’s self-verification process and consequently individual’s behavior through the mechanism of role prescription transmission, the latter being a component of the self (Burke, 1980). In relation to role-based identity, the existence of socially defined shared meanings verifies both the assumption that the self exists and is influenced by society and implicitly the fact that shared meanings are incorporated by one’s identity standard (Deaux & Burke, 2010).

*Identity salience* brings forward the idea that some identities are more relevant to the individual than others and that the upper in the hierarchy one identity is, the more likely is to produce behavioral and affective outcomes (Hogg et al., 1995). Because of their different positions in the hierarchy, the enactment of salient identities brings more influence to one’s self-meaning and feeling of self-worth (Callero, 1985).

Studies regarding identity construction in Roma have mostly focused on ethnic identity and cultural identity, while other identities have been less explored. These types of studies have nourished the idea of homogeneity inside Roma communities or groups, especially in rural communities. This idea is to some extent empirically proved by quantitative data, which describe most rural Roma communities as homogenous, with strong social networks between Roma living inside the same community, low mobility rate and often difficulty and conflict while exploring and affirming their ethnic identity. In the present article, we look at

the identity construction process from the individual's perspective, in our case two Roma ethnics and we make no prior assumptions about the salience of one identity or another. In this manner, we attempt to bring at the surface individual differences that might offer a different perspective on identity construction in Roma adults, enrich and motivate research.

**Stratification and Social Reproduction.** The dynamics of identity construction is maintained by continuous interaction between self and society, in referral to the concepts of social structure and agency. *Social structure* indicates the external and it encompasses things that are social phenomena sui generis, like sub-groups of various types, different roles, regulative norms and cultural values (Williams, 2003). In opposition, *agency* stands for the action of actors within the social context they create (Stets&Burke, 2003). The social structure includes social actors taking a role within a context that is relatively fixed, persisting according to its own principles, and described by minor variations across the same roles (Stets&Burke, 2003). The concept of social structure is both seen as imprisoning the free expression of individuals and a sum of generative rules and resources that shape action and interaction (Giddens, 1976).

In our article, we make use of the concept of social structure while trying to understand social stratification and social reproduction. Sociologists argue that *stratification* is a system of social inequality derived from group hierarchy, reproducing unequal economic rewards, power and prestige within the society (Giddens, 2010). Stratification deals with the aspects of inter- generational social transmission of inequalities and not only refers to assets but to attributes like gender, age or religion. Social inequality is "the condition where people have unequal access to valued resources, services and positions in the society" (Kerbo, 2003:11). In this context, *social reproduction* provides the mechanism through which social structures are reproduced across time and it is the Structuration Theory that enables us to further investigate the action of different socializing agents in the process of social reproduction (Giddens, 1984). In our analysis, we will make use of the following assumptions of the Structuration Theory, as stated by Stones (2005):

- a. The actor's repetition of actions reproduces social structure.
- b. Social structures are relatively fixed, but not inviolable.
- c. The social structures limit the action of individual agents.
- d. Social life is not completely comprehensible from only micro-sociological level or macro-sociological level.
- e. Thus structure and agency constrain each other, the result might be both positive and negative for the individual.

The motivation for choosing the Structuration Theory relies in what seems to be the very nature of the theory: a conceptual orientation for research, rather than a strict methodology (Stones, 2005).

Our focus is on the social structures that are embedded in social stratification and which are likely to be inter-generational reproduced. Studies have introduced the idea of inter-generational social reproduction in Roma families in terms of poverty, education, labor and health. In Romanian rural Roma families, one specific aspect that has to be kept in mind is the large number of households that are the home for three or more generations living together. Besides lack of housing, other reasons for different generations living together are similarities in mechanisms used to fight poverty and to adapt, as well as strong social support networks inside the community (Fleck și Rughniș, 2008). Studies point to social reproduction of labor and social reproduction of education as major reproductive structures that are passed on from one generation to another and therefore this motivates our goal to investigate how education and labor are socially reproduced across life span, from the perspective of the Roma adults.

**Identity and Life Story.** One type of phenomenological approach is the life story method. Research in the field of identity study uses life story method for exploring the expression of personal and collective identity. While recounting his life, the individual lives a process of constructing and re-constructing his identity and as Atkinson states, the “story brings order to our experience and helps the individual view his life both subjectively and objectively” (2006:11). Thus, the life story provides accounts of the significance of the lived experience in the construction of identity (Chaitin, 2006). Moreover, the life history interview also allows individuals to discuss and recount their lives in their social, economic and political environment (Given, 2008). Research shows that phenomenology is relevant for the study of people’s sense of identity because of its dynamic and flowing character, similar to the dynamic nature of identity. In what concerns the present study, the phenomenon, in our case identity, dictates not only the method, but also the specific of the participants.

### **Aims**

The major aim of the present study is to gain a deeper understanding of how identities are expressed in the life story interviews of the two older adults of Roma ethnicity. Throughout our phenomenological study, another issue emerged, issue we have chosen to investigate: the social structures that are inter-generational reproduced. We formulated the following four research questions:

- a. What is the participants’ sense of their identity?
- b. What are the main conflicts that occur?

d. What type of social structures are inter-generational reproduced and through what mechanism?

## **Method**

*Participants.* We conducted life story interviews with two older adults of Roma ethnicity (aged 63 and 50) and chose purposive sampling to identify the participants as the most important type of non-probability sample (Welman&Kruger, 1999). Both participants live in a village in the north-west part of Romania, in Cluj county and identified themselves as Roma. Due to issues of confidentiality, we will refer to them as Ionas and Alexandru.

*Procedure.* The interviews were conducted in the participants' home, in the setting that the participants chose. About five hours of interview time was collected with each participant, in a series of two to three in depth-interviews. Participants were guided to refer to aspects across the life-course that are meaningful to them and we chronologically outlined major life stages in order to help them organize their story (Attkinson, 2006; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 2006). A series of open-ended guiding questions were prepared in advance for each of the life stages and were selectively used, on the one hand to provide support to the participants and on the other hand to assure a certain common orientation across participants' stories. We ended the interviews with each participant at the point where we reached data saturation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Tape recorders were the source of data gathering; in preparation for the following interview, existing recordings were transcribed and reviewed in search for internal consistency (McCracken, 1988) and in preparation for the following interview. After the final interview, we presented a transcribed copy of our interviews to the participants so that they could append.

In order to ensure ethical research (Holloway 1997; Kvale, 1996), we asked for the informed consent of the participants stating the purpose of the research, the procedures of the research, risks and benefits, voluntary nature of the research participation, the participants' right to stop the research at any point and the procedures used to protect confidentiality (Groenwald, 2004; Arskye & Knight, 1999). About the issue of ownership of the story, we have also asked for their permission to publish and present their story and we explained the current publishing intention. The two participants agreed to all the conditions mentioned and they signed the consent form.

*Analysis.* On analyzing the interviews, we implemented the phenomenological descriptive analysis, aimed at helping us understand the phenomenon of identity and social reproduction. This type of analysis is suitable for the present research, as we believe that there is a scarcity of information on the

subject regarding the specific participants on the one hand and the nature of the phenomenon under study on the other hand. For analysis of descriptions given by participants, we underwent the idea of bracketing, which refers to bracketing the researcher's personal preconceptions (Groenwald, 2004). Recordings were listened repeatedly as to gain the holistic sense of the participants' life stories and to capture the uniqueness of each experience (Groenwald, 2004). Descriptions were divided into meaning-laden statements (Penner, 2008) that are essential to our study, which we then clustered into units of meaning (Groenwald, 2004). The next step was to summarize each interview and validate it in the light of other interviews conducted with the same participant. Finally, we extracted general and unique themes from all the interviews and identified the context from where the themes emerged (Hycner, 1999).

*Research findings.* Analysis of the interviews allowed us to see what are the general themes that emerge from each story. Therefore, in the story of Ionas, the identified themes are his identity as a builder, the connection between his ethnicity and religion and his role inside the community where he lives. For Alexandru, we identified as meaningful to him his occupational identity as a twig weaver and the relation with the Roma and non-Roma across his life. Following the themes mentioned, we will present their stories by describing the context where they emerged.

### **The story of Ionas**

*"This is what I loved most: being a builder"*

Ionas recalls being 8 years old, sitting outside his parent's house and carving things out of wood, potatoes or mud. *"I have always loved creating things that haven't been created before"*, he states. At this point, he lived together with his parents, two sisters and one brother and he describes his family as being "poor, very poor". His father was a brick maker in summer and a weave twiger in winter, while his mother was a sewer, both of his parents having inherited the skills from their parents. Being ill, his mother died very young, and what Ionas believes as most important about his mother is the fact that she was a very kind woman, who cared for her children, could create clothes and could make food *"out of nothing"*. Ionas's memories about his father were more about him being a servant for *"a rich Hungarian"* and this is what he believes influenced his father's entire perspective on life. His father was a servant since early childhood, *"employee of a rich man"* which meant that in exchange of his work he gave him food and clothing. Ionas was told many stories about how servants should obey their masters; he repeatedly refers to his father as a servant and he believes that it is this status that made him an *"uneducated, harsh man"*. He believes that the respect that his father tried to teach him, meaning how to behave properly, in his example how to say in

Romanian and Hungarian “*Good morning, master or mistress!*” was not what he wanted to achieve in life, as “*you cannot be a servant and an educated person at the same time*”. Not only his father, he believes, did not teach him what he needed as a child, but teachers also did not know how to make him grow fond of school. What he would have needed from school, he states, is not to keep them “*closed into the community*” but to let them see what is happening “*outside*” and what kind of jobs are suitable for each one of them. Education, he believes, might have helped him become a “*different person*”.

Later on, at the age of 16, after his father’s death, Ionas left the village and travelled, occasionally working as a brick maker; in this period he describes himself as a rambler. He found himself doing the same thing his father did, he says, which is working as a “*servant for others which are smarter than me and can take advantage of me*”. His regret is again the fact that he could not obtain a license as a builder, because of the lack of money and thus impossibility to attend a qualification. Ionas believes that this is the reason why he always asked for less money for his work than others.

*“I have always loved work and this is what I needed most, to start building, putting one brick after another, measuring, daubing; this is what I wanted so much to learn, but as a child I couldn’t go to school anymore and as a factory worker I couldn’t leave my job [...]. But I watched others and I learnt from them. For me, work is like a gift, it is like love, you need to love work. If you do your work without love, you will never see it done”.*

After starting working as a builder, he describes his work as “*thirty years work*” of houses built as an accomplishment and he refers to others in the village who do not demonstrate any skills like helpless people. Finally, at the age of 62 he succeeded to participate at a professional qualification training and became a licensed builder. Looking at his lifetime accomplishments so far, he ranks the houses that he has built highest.

*“Gypsies at the end of the world”*

While going to school, he recalls several episodes when he felt that he was bullied for being Roma. One episode is about a girl, the girl of one the mayor’s office representatives in the village who used to threaten him every day that he would be battered up. Trying to understand what the reason for that was, Ionas asserts “*I was not guilty of anything, she must have had something against Roma*”. He also remembers that the non-Roma colleagues in the classroom provided food for the Roma children in their classroom, with the condition that they took them to their hearts. Among the friends he made in school and as an adolescent, he mentions one significant person in his group of friends, a girl which he liked very much, although he did not consider her the most beautiful girl in the village, but “*she loved gypsies*”, he states. Following the root of the romantic relationships across his lifetime, he comes back several times to the idea that he always thought



of the non-Roma women that they are beautiful and that he would have liked a romantic relationship with a non-Roma woman. As his story develops, Ionas turns his attention to one important thing that he believes became very meaningful to him around the age of 40, naming religion. In the context of religion, he presents numerous reflections about his ethnicity. He feels that the two aspects of his life are interrelated, as religion offers him a greater sense of his ethnicity.

*“Gypsies? You know what gypsy means? It means something you shouldn’t touch. But I believe God didn’t create gypsies, he only created humans”.*

Ionas talks about how difficult it was for him to find a church to attend. He went to several churches where when he sat down on a certain chair, the non-Roma moved away from him and in one church, the church administrator asked him to move to the part of the church where no one was sitting. He only found his place in the Pentecostal church, where he was well received. Concerning religion, he continues his story saying that religion is the great motivator in his life and that from the religious perspective being Roma is a chance, as God looks closer to those who are at the end of the world, the Roma as he states.

*“Why do I think of myself as a happy Roma? Because God doesn’t look at that. The others, no matter what you are wearing or what you do, you will always hear them whispering...gypsy....gypsy...”*

Coming back to *“gypsies at the end of the world”*, he says that in his opinion he experienced himself discrimination and inequality coming from the fact that he is Roma, and saw it all around, which reinforces his prior statement about Roma. He thinks of himself as being Roma, but *“a different kind”* because he most values education, respect and religion and especially in terms of education, he sees a great part of the other Roma as not congruent to him. Ionas advised that he has one message he would like to address to young Roma. This states as follows:

*“I would like to tell the young generation that they will always hear these things....look at that gypsy, he is so educated, so well dresses, so beautiful. I think they should not pay attention to that; that should not upset them... that they call them gypsies. This is our ethnicity; we need to live with it, bear it, feel it, and always keep in mind that we are responsible for it.”*

*“Let them come to me: I want to listen and help”*

Next to religion, Ionas identifies as equally important to him the role he has inside the community, that of a community leader, recognized by the community and the local authorities. He started taking initiative in the community when he was asked by the Police and other local authorities to facilitate their communication with the Roma community. This role was very important to him, but conflicts occurred both from the part of the community and the local authorities. Most often, he found himself mediating between the local authorities and the Roma community and in this context he recalled information about what he usually tells the

authorities when they complain about the Roma community: *“let them come to me”*. In the role of the leader, he tries to approach the community in a loving manner, guided by the principles of his spiritual beliefs that he describes as being listening and providing help. It is again religion, he says, that stands as the basis of his actions. Although strongly attached to the community and a candidate for future elections as council member, Ionas says that for most of his life in the community his dream was to leave the community, if not for him, for his children’s sake.

### **The story of Alexandru**

*„This rubbish helps you bring food on the table”*

Alexandru was born into a family who fought for survival. His parents earned their living from weaving twigs. Alexandru’s parents separated when he was very young, and he remained in the care of his helpless father. His father was a worker in an industrial factory and after working hours he also worked as a weaver and a builder. His mother also worked in weaving twigs. His father’s parents earned their living from weaving baskets, while his mother’s parents from making bricks. Alexandru first learned weaving twigs from his father, *“a painstakingly, but beautiful thing”*, which he came to like and love without any pressure. Alexandru states: *“I liked the brick part too, but I was more attracted to weaving. This is what most appealed to me and it brought me a great deal of earnings”*.

His childhood was divided between helping his parents in their labors, so they can buy what was necessary for school, some studying and little playing, but as he recounts *“not too much playing, because I had work to do”*. Both his family and the next-door families travelled through the nearby villages in order to sell the baskets, but *“for food, not money”*.

Just as much as he liked learning weaving twigs from his father, Alexandru recounts that in an equal measure he liked learning in school. Although he wanted to study mechanics, he was not admitted into high school, and so he chose wire drawing, just so he would not be forced to quit school. In order to find a job faster and earn money, he decided to study at a trade school and not a high school. Alexandru continued studying during his lifetime, earning a qualification in mine digging, guard agent and commercial worker. His training as a wire drawer proved to be useful in what concerns integration into labor market. At 22, he was hired as a wire drawer. After 4 years, because he was hired only as a temporary worker, he was let go. The next 4 years he was forced to move, together with his wife and children, to a nearby town, where he had found a job in the oil field. Because he could no longer afford the rent, they had to move back and had to struggle to get his old job back, at the industrial factory. Just like his father, after working hours, he weaved baskets, which he sold in the nearby villages. He never gave up

weaving, not even when he was living in the other city, where, together with his mother, who had an osier plantation, weaved baskets and sold them to the flower shops. Alexandru mentions he tried finding a job outside Romania by sending some basket models to a neighbor who lived in Austria so that he could sell them. But because the raw material his baskets required was not easily available, Alexandru's departure was not possible.

After losing for the second time his job at the factory, he obtained a license for weaving twigs, although for a period of time, due to his lack of professional qualification, this license was suspended. Alexandru never gave up weaving twigs; at present, he works as a guard agent, the only job he found after countless attempts where he was turned down and continues weaving twigs. According to Alexandru's statements, when he was in need he continued weaving twigs, and he has managed to build his house with the money earned from weaving twigs as his wage at the factory was insufficient.

Just like Alexandru learned weaving twigs from his father, he has passed this skill to his wife, his children and daughter in law because, he says: *"where you go with a penknife, you can earn a living. You don't have to hurt yourself, you don't have to ask anybody for help"*. He also says he wants to pass this skill to his grandchildren. About weaving twigs, Alexandru states: *"this rubbish helps you bring food to the table"*.

*"I took him once with me, to find twigs. I took him, I started cutting twigs, he stood there. Daddy, I'm hungry. Eat... but there is nothing to eat. How is there nothing to eat? Just look carefully, look carefully at this twigs, do you see them? Each twig has a bread, a shoe, a sausage, a chicken hanging on it. Where do you see that? Child, think, look ahead... not here, but into the future. If you cut them, make them... you can buy anything you want, bread, sausage, shoes, whatever you want. Nobody owns you. He looked at me and said you are right. And I took out the lunch pack and said to him... take this and eat it!"*

Alexandru is grateful, as he repeatedly mentions, to his father for the skill he has inherited. He is the only one who carries on the tradition in his family, his brother and sister never learned it because, Alexandru states, they have done better than him.

#### *"Between non-Roma and Roma"*

Recounting about the place he was born and lived in, Alexandru mentions there were few Roma children: *"I was mostly with the non-Roma children"*. His first childhood memory regarding friends is that of a non-Roma child *"he grew up and first of all ate with"*. He mentions this child's family, along with another non-Roma family, to be there for him throughout difficult times for him: *"They never ate without me, and even more, they said... take some to your brothers! [...] come*

on, take your packet, so you don't have to look at others eating". Alexandru also recounts about his non-Roma friend:

*"The memory from the moment I became a pioneer [...] you must buy a white shirt, trousers [...] See daddy, I'm becoming a pioneer [...] he bought me trousers, a shirt, a hat. He could not buy me shoes, so I was wearing snickers. After the formalities, we had our photo taken, individually. That is when [...] the colleague I have told you about, the non-Roma, took off his shoes and gave them to me, so I could take my picture wearing shoes. Even today I can remember him there, yes... I remember him. It is such a pleasant memory. [...] My non-Roma neighbor. [...]"*

Alexandru also recounts an experience lived in his military years, when a lieutenant refused to write on his military papers his Roma ethnicity:

*"The custom was they had to write on your military paper what you are, your ethnicity. He wouldn't write down I was a Roma ethnic [...] he wrote I was Romanian on my military papers"*.

Alexandru recalls, later on during his lifetime, a non-Roma family denounced him because he was working without a license, *"they didn't like to see I was an expert"*. Another story speaks of the help he received, on numerous occasions, from different state institutions like City Hall, Public Finances, who helped them during the time we was working without any legal forms.

When talking about himself, Alexandru states: *"I am a gypsy [...] I have never kept this a secret"*. And he continues *"I wasn't raised among you, because I was raised among non- Roma, but I never recoiled from you"*. He also mentions:

*"Nobody recoiled [...] from the Hungarians and Romanians I never had such experiences as being pushed aside. Only that they criticize... look what your Roma are doing. My Roma? They are not mine. I am a Roma man, but that does not mean they are mine. I cannot force them to think"*.

Talking about the Roma community Alexandru lives in, he states that they struggle, they are not united, they hate each other, and they fight. He also talks about times when Roma people ask for his help in dealing with different documents necessary for City Hall. He states he likes to help Roma, to determine them to take their children to school, to kindergarten, so that they will not be inferior to non-Roma. *"I wouldn't like to be their leader, but [...] to go and fight for their rights"*.

For Alexandru, avoiding trouble, misdoings and keeping the right path represent the way *"not to be under a cloud [...] you are treated in a different way, the mayor talks to you in a different manner, the doctor, and the police"*.

## Discussion

The interviews provided us with rich information about the participants' sense of their identity as well as about their perception on inter-generational transmission. Both stories include vivid descriptions of activities and values that are significant to them, providing us with the opportunity to understand their lived experience while making use of our theoretical framework. The first thing that emerges from both stories is the participants' occupational identity and its connection to inter-generational social transmission. In Ionas's story, his identity as a builder is in various contexts conflicting with the role his father assigns for him. A permanent theme in his story is the opposition he sees between being a servant, like his father or studying and becoming a builder, while the latter holds most value to him. Still, for a long period in his life he takes the role his father assigns, which is also validated by other members of the family and the community. Throughout his lifetime, his identity as a builder remains salient while there is a continuous search for enacting this identity. At the point when he succeeds in becoming a builder, he describes feelings of self-meaning and self-worth towards his work when he mentions that this represents his greatest accomplishment. For Alexandru, his identity as a weaves twiger is constructed throughout his childhood and validated by his father; he believes the skills that he learned from his father at some points in his life made the difference between hunger and survival. He associates strong feelings of self-meaning to what he does, being proud that the products of his work crossed the country borders, that he built his house only with the money earned from weaving twigs and that he never had to ask anyone for help

In the same time, he also thinks of himself in relation to others as someone who has to wave twigs, as he does not have many opportunities. Although salient and producing affective outcomes across his lifetime, Alexandru somehow relates occupational identity to the social transmission of low paid labor in his family, while talking about his earnings and the fact that his brothers are not weave twigers as they have other profitable options. He also relates low paid labor and education to his family and the social context during his childhood and adolescence, and this allows us to make an assumption about the social transmission of education.

Ionas draws a permanent link between education and work, reflecting on the similarities between his parents' inability to care for his education and his own inability to motivate his children towards education and better employment. Several examples in his story come to argue that social transmission of education especially is what he believed determined his development. About labor, Ionas associates several episodes of his life with hard work and striving, but never, he believes, hard work has helped him overcome his situation. In this respect, we identify that from his perspective, labor and education are the most important

aspects that shaped his social status. Moreover, in enacting his identity as a builder, these two factors constantly hindered his enactment of the salient identity.

Concerning their ethnicity and sense of identity, both participants identify themselves as Roma but they attach very diverse meanings to their ethnic identity. On the one hand, Alexandru recalls as important the other's perceptions about him of being a non-Roma, meaning that his ethnic identity was validated by the Roma and refuted by the non-Roma. Ionas, on the other hand, offers multiple descriptions about how ethnicity and religion have constructed his role as a community leader. One interesting aspect in Ionas's story is the fact that he feels committed to his ethnic identity in the context of religion. It is only when religion plays an important part in his life that he feels at peace with the fact that he is Roma.

In conclusion, data has allowed us to identify aspects of identity and inter-generational reproduction in the participants' life stories, meaning the description of the phenomenon itself, from the participants' perspective. Drawing back to our research questions, we believe the discussion section together with the presentation of the research findings provide an insight into the identity construction and social reproduction processes in the light of the participants' life stories.

### **Limitations of the study**

Due to the fact that the present study is conducted using a phenomenological approach, our focus was on the in depth analysis of the phenomenon in question. We have chosen our participants so that they would illustrate the research phenomenon and bring forward descriptions that will add up to the prior understanding of identity construction. However, some limits of the present study emerge:

1. Due to the insufficient studies in the focus field (older adults of Roma ethnicity and identity construction), a higher number of participants would increase the level of understanding and, implicitly, of knowing their reality.
2. Telling the life stories of the participants is a very sensitive issue, and so we hope we did not cause any injustice to their stories throughout the chosen framework.
3. Taking into consideration the number of participants, we do not intend to generalize the findings, and further on should not be generalized by the reader, but they could represent, indeed, the starting point for other studies in the field of identity research.

### **Concluding remarks**

The current study presented a phenomenological insight into the lived experience and identity construction process of two older adults of Roma ethnicity.

A great amount of descriptions comes to verify the mechanism of inter-generational social reproduction and to identify the types of social structures that the participants consider to be in direct link to their family inheritance. Furthermore, the participants themselves present the relationships they identify among aspects like labor and education and the inter-generational transmission in their families, together with their feelings and meanings that they have attached to them. This confirmed our choice for the phenomenological descriptive analysis as the most appropriate manner to tell the stories of the participants.

In support of the contribution that the current research has brought to identity study with Roma participants, we find three major arguments. First, the research we developed was innovative from the point of view of the method used and therefore it has led to findings that complement prior research. Second, identity studies with Roma ethnics have mostly focused on ethnic identity, letting aside occupational identity, which turned out to be a salient identity in our study. Finally, social reproduction throughout the process of identity construction is one important aspect that we succeeded to follow and describe in the participants' life stories, and this might support the efforts made in understanding the vulnerability status of Roma. Considering these arguments, we believe further research is necessary in the field of identity construction and social reproduction in Roma adults, as these studies might bring not only scientific knowledge but might also help design intervention strategies where needed.

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