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**Diverging Mobilities, Converging Immobility? Romanian  
Roma Youths at the Crossroad between Spatial, Social  
and Educational Im/mobility**

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### **Abstract**

The article investigates the youth transitions of a group of Romanian Roma adolescents with different im/mobility experiences but originating from the same transnational rural village. Their post-compulsory education orientations and development of autonomous im/mobility projects are anything but homogeneous; nevertheless, they all develop halfway between the reproduction of socio-economic inequalities and the challenge of social mobility. While in Spain young migrants are confronted with severe residential and school mobility but have access to wider vocational training opportunities, their peers in Romania rely on more consistent educational trajectories, but face the prospect of poorly valued work in the local rural economy. As for young returnees, they struggle to mobilize their richer transnational social and cultural capital as a way of overcoming the negative experience and result of (re)migration. Based on broader, longitudinal, multi-sited and collaborative ethnography, this paper aims to unveil the interplay between structural constraints and individual agency that shapes meaningful interaction between spatial, social and educational im/mobility in both transnational localities. While emphasizing the usefulness of the concept of transition to explain the processes of intergenerational transfer of poverty in contemporary Europe, we discuss how temporality, social capital and mobility engage with the specific socio-economic context, transformations, and imagined futures of its young protagonists.

*Keywords: Youth transitions; Roma mobility; student mobility; educational choices; social mobility; social capital.*

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## *1. Introduction*

This paper aims at answering the question whether spatial mobility sets in motion social mobility careers by exploring how Romanian Roma rural youths make their transitions from school education into the labor market in a context of migration. Much of the literature about young people's educational and post-educational choices tends to give credit to the idea that formal qualifications lead to upward social mobility careers. In the same way, current European policy frameworks seek to foster societal development and individual advancement by getting more people educated, and for longer. Yet, the adversities that socio-economically disadvantaged youths are faced with as they strive to comply with these prescriptions clearly reveal the practical limitations of such powerful narrative construction. Thus, moving from an ethnographic and actor-centered perspective, this article unveils the complex interplay of structural constraints and individual agency that shapes the interaction between spatial, educational and social im/mobility for young people growing up in poverty. We first introduce the concept of 'youth transition' and outline the relation between formal education and social mobility according to both official discourses and critical scholarships. We use Gambetta's (1987) comprehensive framework on individual decision-making in education as it contributes to understanding how discrepancies are created between institutionally defined paths and young people's actual educational choices. This will serve to illustrate how the lived set of temporal, physical, and relational conditions frames and guides the way vital conjunctures are navigated, and educational choices are made. Next, the biographies of four Roma adolescents with different experiences of im/mobility will be presented. Ultimately, our discussion will highlight the complex way that experiences of place, mobility, and social capital influence educational and post-educational choices, concluding that the transformative potential of mobility and migration is largely dependent on relational settings and external structures of opportunities in which these processes are embedded.

## *2. Youth im/mobilities in social structure*

Enquires into the youth phase are critical for understanding how structural and systemic inequalities are repopulated and chances for social transformation are shaped. Youth scholars agree in asserting that the original position of an individual in the social structure influences both their opportunities in youth and their final destinations in adulthood (MacDonald et al., 2005). But at the same time, no one disputes that many young people 'manage to escape the forces of social reproduction and the destinations that their ascribed status would predict' (Gambetta, 1987: 2). Building on such ambivalence, numerous authors have dedicated their work to untangling the intricate mechanisms that reproduce imbalances in the distributions of valuable social, cultural, and economic resources by highlighting the constrained nature of the youth phase, whilst at the same time asserting the meaningful role of individual agency in shaping young people's movement to adulthood.

Evolving scholarship (MacDonald et al., 2005) denotes how the concept of 'transition' was vigorously contested in youth sociology as it originally implied the

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idea that movements towards adulthood are progressive in nature and coherent with linear school-to-work trajectories. While the main purpose of these critiques was to rescue contemporary and allegedly more ‘individualized’ movements into adulthood from structurally oriented and class-based analyses, youth scholars have broadened the notion of transition in two directions. On the one hand, they have recognized the diversity, fluidity and unpredictability of such transformations at the level of communities and individuals. On the other, they have started looking beyond the movements from full-time education to the labor market to wider and equally significant aspects of the youth experience, such as housing and family transitions, as well as leisure, drug-use, and criminality.

Similar to other research in this field, this paper recognizes the holistic nature of the concept of transition as a ‘useful metaphor that does not presume a particular sort of content, direction or length’ (Macdonald and Marsh, 2005: 36). Thus, if movements into adulthood are processual and non-straightforward, attention should be shifted from discrete demographic life stages marked by specific events to ‘critical moments’ (Abajo and Carrasco, 2004; Thomson et al., 2002) of particular biographical relevance that have implications for young people’s social relations, positions, and life trajectories. Building on this argument, Langevang (2008) suggests that the concepts of ‘vital junctures’ (Johnson-Hanks, 2002) and ‘social navigations’ (Christiansen et al., 2006) represent a valuable theoretical lens for appraising the intrinsic complexity of youth transitions, the former describing a temporary, ‘socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation’ (Langevang, 2008: 2040), the latter relating to the way individuals proceed through these junctures of events and networks, seeking to move towards their desirable futures by constantly reinventing their life trajectories in a changing and unstable social environment.

### *3. Progressing through education: an enduring mirage*

Despite school-to-work careers being only a fragment of wider processes of transition, formal education still represents a time of key changes that contributes to the shaping of young people’s social destinations in adulthood, and may help them to escape the forces of social reproduction. Schools are ideally entrusted with the task of overcoming social inequalities by smoothing down from young people’s lives those structural constraints that hinder their ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai, 2004). The opinion that formal education is crucial to definitions of successful youth transitions is widespread both locally and globally, as for many people growing up in economically deprived communities progressing through education still represents a powerful and trusted pathway to ‘become somebody’ in life (Crivello, 2011). Statistical data corroborate the meaningfulness of these expectations by displaying the existence of a pervasive association between educational attainment and participation in the labor market (OECD, 2016). Similarly, throughout the last two decades several European policy frameworks<sup>1</sup> have endeavored to claim and then to operationalize the crucial,

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<sup>1</sup>These policy frameworks are reflected in the ‘White paper on education and training’ (EC Commission, 1995), the ‘Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training’ (Council of the

positive relation between education, employment, and social inclusion. Thus, European school systems have gradually become the flagship of a common geopolitical agenda (EU2020) revolving around the notion of a ‘knowledge economy’ and pursuing the twofold ambition of boosting market competitiveness and at the same time social equity through increasing access to educational and training opportunities for all. In spite of this, research conducted in underprivileged contexts suggests that formal education does not suffice for overcoming structural inequalities and ensuring an alternative future livelihood for poor rural youths (Azaola, 2012; Crivello, 2011; Punch, 2015). Rather, access to quality education and the consequent opportunity to move into suitable employment is unequally distributed by ethnic, racial, gender, class, income, and geographic divisions. Partly, this relates to the axiomatic consideration that schools are not artefacts separated from the rest of the world but a faithful mirror of opportunity structures, macro-economic transformations, and structural violence.

Numerous authors have endeavored to untangle the ineluctable tension between individual experiences and hegemonic assumptions about social mobility by looking at the very concept of educational and post-educational aspirations. Stahl (2012) suggests that neoliberal educational policies that prioritize competitive, economic and status-based logics tend to regard aspirations as mere individual traits that arise from otherwise ‘passive citizens’ of the welfare state. He also stresses the tension between the aspirations and the underlying conceptualisation of the socially mobile middle-class and the working-class families. On the other hand, Zipin and colleagues (2015) single out two main rationales that ought to shape the formation of educational and post-educational aspirations among socially and geographically marginalized youths: doxic versus habituated logics. *Doxic logic* refers to a set of ideological principles transmitted by official policies that support dominant norms about ‘worthy futures’. Following these standards, less privileged individuals are more likely to be pushed towards aspirations that will later prove to be unattainable, and for whose failure they will blame themselves rather than unequal opportunity structures. Only in rare cases does the ‘ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers’ (Yosso, 2005: 77) seem to leave space for what Zipin and colleagues (2015) refer to as ‘subcultural doxic aspirations.’ In contrast, *habituated logic* (from Bourdieu’s habitus) applies to those self-limiting dispositions that are informed by the subjects’ position in the social structure and set the limits of their ‘situated possibility’ (ibid., 2005: 234) associated with their subordinated condition. In such a disjunctive landscape, a third process seems to be represented by emergent aspirations grounded in lived resources, or funds of aspirations: a mixture of imaginings, voicings and agentic impulses that point towards alternative futures which are neither doxic, nor habituated, but grounded on a *reimaginative logic*.

All of this raises important questions about the role of school education in shaping life chances and transitions to adulthood, and requires focusing our attention on the very mechanisms governing educational and post-educational choices.

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European Union, 2009), the EU2020 ‘Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth’ (European Commission, 2010), and the ‘Framework for national Roma integration strategies’ (European Commission, 2011).

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#### 4. *Decision-making in education*

Deciding about education is a complex issue that involves a range of institutionally defined options and an indefinite number of structural causes and subjective decision-making criteria. In this respect, Diego Gambetta's (1987) comprehensive analytical framework on individual decision making in education has the great merit of dealing with all these variables by combining three different scholarly traditions: the structuralist approach, the inertial forces approach, and the rational-intentional approach.

The structuralist approach sees human behavior as limited by inescapable external constraints like macro-economic forces and institutional dispositions. Although subjects are acknowledged to make decisions in compliance with their own preferences and intentions, their options seem to be largely channeled by externalities. From this perspective, educational choices are subject to material and financial limitations met by individuals, but also bound by the feasible set of alternatives and the specific regulations attached to any given school system. Educational schemes apply indiscriminately to everyone, but they also operate in a discriminating fashion by increasing the burden of pre-existing economic constraints. Keeping low-achieving students back, not providing adequate economic aid for poorer families, or delaying access to vocational routes have the considerable effect of increasing both the direct and indirect costs of education (books, fees, transport, and foregone earnings), thus discouraging indigent children from continuing their studies. Structuralist scholarship makes it manifest that low-income families are induced to consider school as a consumer commodity (which is acquired in greater quantities the lower its price) and work the competing alternative. Thus, either poorer students need to have stronger educational ambitions and to make greater sacrifices, or they are likely to be pushed towards shorter educational routes and early school withdrawal.

The inertial forces approach takes account of those psychological and environmental mechanisms that inform individuals' decision-making independently of their awareness. From this perspective, disparities in educational attainment are to be found in the underlying forces of economic, cultural and class causation that operate at the level of preference formation. Inertial forces embodied in beliefs, sub-cultural values, and social norms may either act on the preference structure, altering the value attached to any given option, or restrict the possibilities of evaluating and processing relevant information about each option, narrowing down the feasible set of alternatives from its logical to its perceived extension. Building on former research, Gambetta identifies three potential sources of inertia: family income careers, cognitive constraints and limited reference groups. *Family income careers* account for the economic experience and the patterns of income of the parents, and are held responsible for triggering a sense of caution towards the modification of schematic interpretations and embodied responses by producing certain 'models of the world', such as general assumptions regarding the way socio-economic forces operate. *Cognitive constraints* relate to the impediments of students at the lowest level of parental education as regards seeing the instrumental advantages of formal education and from processing the minimum information needed to form educational

aspirations themselves. Finally, *limited reference groups* explain the inclination to consider as social norms only the standards of other members of a certain group (relatives, peers, community) which are held accountable for exposing educational choices to strong normative pressure rooted in pre-existing, shared automatic responses.

Ultimately, the ‘rational-intentional approach’ assumes that individuals, when they are faced with multiple options, are capable of acting purposively in accordance with their preferences and choosing rationally in compliance with expected future rewards. From this view, educational decisions are taken after comparing alternative courses of action and evaluating them according to personal aspirations and expected probability of success. While it must be recognized that preference formation is significantly shaped by structural and inertial forces, the expected benefits of education are assessed through two specific criteria: *past academic achievements* give a measure of the ability one believes themselves to possess and may either enhance or reduce both self-confidence and the shadow costs attached to a certain choice, while *labor market prospects* suggest that educational choices are sensitive to working opportunities and that individuals with similar social backgrounds would choose differently under different macro-economic circumstances. According to this view, longer educational routes would then be regarded either as an investment (human capital approach) or as an immediate alternative to inaction and unemployment.

Building on these different approaches, Gambetta concludes that subjects always ‘evaluate rationally the various elements for making educational decisions, which include economic constraints, personal academic ability and expected labor market benefits.’ However, ‘this process of evaluation takes place on the basis of their personal preferences and life-plans’ which are partly the result of random influences and partly the reverberation of specific class-biases shaped by inertial forces ‘which act as weights that subjects’ sub-intentionality apply to the elements of their rational evaluation’ (1987: 186).<sup>2</sup>

### ***5. Educational navigations through time, place, and social relations***

The mechanisms introduced so far shed light on the influence of temporality, locality, and sociability on the formation of educational preferences, as well as on the role played by processes of social comparison attached to each dimension.

First and foremost, the presumption of intentionality in human behavior is based on the ability to use the future as a determinant of action (Gambetta, 1987) whereby temporality is both the frame where preferences are formed and the principle that turns them into actual intentions. The *moment in time* when educational choices are made is especially critical, as it shapes the actual set of available options and conditions as well as the incidental influence of the structural and institutional forces at stake. For instance, while students advance in their careers, economic constraints and the shadow costs of learning are likely to decrease whereas

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<sup>2</sup> Differences in the possession of cultural capital (capacity for abstraction, language manipulation, formal thought), which are often regarded as one of the main explanations of inequality in educational attainment, do not find space in this model but exclusively in regard to the formation of educational preferences at the two extremes of parental education.



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school options and requirements become tighter. However, youth transitions are not mere reactions to present and past circumstances but are above all individual and social processes of becoming – the first in a long series – whose nature is complex and non-linear precisely because they are ‘continually open to the future’ (Worth, 2009: 1051). According to this view, the time ahead is an open-ended dimension where ‘emotionally thick representations of what one’s future *might* and *should* look like’ can be cultivated in form of subjective and always changing aspirations (Boccagni, 2017: 2). Here, *notions about the past and the future* are crucial for assessing present educational choices and aspirations. While former school experiences lay the background for self-defining memories that guide the formation of imagined future selves, these function as motivational resources ‘the content of which serves to harness ambition and direct action’ (Prince, 2014: 704). Also, the *temporal horizon* within which individuals project themselves into the future is associated with the ability to catch sight of the rewards attached to current efforts and, consequently, with the chance of deferring gratification and making long-term investments (Horstmanshof and Zimitat, 2007).

The formation of future self-concepts and aspirations is not disconnected from the physical world but is inextricably bound to people’s *everyday place experience*. Place is not a neutral stage where events unfold, but a character in itself, being shaped by and giving shape to young people’s lives, relations, and actions (Robinson, 2009; Thompson, Russell and Simmons, 2014). ‘Place represents a particular nexus of class, ethnicity, history and institutions that is set alongside lived experiences in education and the labor market’ (Kintrea, St Clair and Houston, 2015). Building on Heidegger’s understanding of place as an ontological structure, Prince (2014) develops an emplaced approach to the theory of possible selves. Her core hypothesis is that, since the physical environment is one of the ways through which structural inequalities manifest themselves, it also plays a critical role in framing and guiding young people’s lives. Such a place-based characterization of possibilities is informed by two dimensions of place: place identity, which is the experience-based collection of *personal cognitions* about a location ‘that reflects how the physical environments of an individual’s everyday life are actively incorporated into the self’ (Prince, 2014: 698), and the *social representation* of place, which refers to the external meanings, symbols, and attributes attached to a given place. Accordingly, residential and school places can be seen as a vivid reminder of young people’s condition that send them daily messages about who they are and who they might become (Prince, 2014). From this perspective, place transformations, personal transitions and moves may change the relation with the physical environment (Hall, Coffey and Lashua, 2009; Manzo, 2003; Valentine, 2003) and disclose access to new, unexpected futures.

Ultimately, the experience of place is mediated by and subordinated to the social interactions attached to each physical environment. ‘Emplaced interactions’ not only reveal one’s position in the class structure but – similarly and contemporarily to place – also constitute a vivid frame of reference from which inferences about future possible selves can be drawn. Youth, in particular, internalize beliefs about their own potential futures through social interactions with significant adults, including parents and other ‘exemplary individuals that can be trusted’ (Colombo, 2011: 23). Peer social capital also exerts a substantial influence on both educational aspiration and socio-

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emotional well-being, whereby the latter is seen to compensate for the less appealing aspects of schooling (Jørgensen, 2016: 572). Nevertheless, for young people at the two opposite ends of the social spectrum, educational attitudes are particularly dependent on restricted reference group dynamics and uniform economic experiences (Gambetta, 1987). Even though disadvantaged neighborhoods are neither secluded from the rest of the world nor necessarily associated with lower aspirations (Kintrea et al., 2015), growing up and learning in a spatially and socially segregated environment inevitably binds the processes of preference formation to general assumptions extrapolated from limited, unrepresentative interactions. For instance, when family or community income careers revolve around irregular, short-term, and low-value income streams, young people may interpret economic precariousness as an attribute of the economic system itself and be pushed to develop a general sense of caution towards alternative economic selves (Gambetta, 1987). Similarly, students with non-school-oriented peer networks are negatively affected in their educational efforts, whereas young people who have friends that value education tend to achieve more (Ream and Rumberger, 2008). In this respect, social capital theorists are used to distinguishing between ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ networks (Putnam, 2004; Reynolds, 2007) whereby the former refers to the norms of reciprocity that cut across various lines of social cleavage, and the latter to the links among people who share similar backgrounds. Putnam (2000; in: Jørgensen, 2016) argues that whereas bonding networks are enough for ‘getting by’, bridging ones create the broader identities and reciprocities that are needed to ‘get ahead.’ In the words of de Souza Briggs (1998), the first can be called ‘coping capital’ as it provides social support, while the latter can be referred to as ‘social leverage’, which points to the use of network ties in social mobility.

To sum up, young people’s inferences about who they might become are based on multidimensional processes of comparison that unfold both *inwards* – between past, present, and future selves – and *outwards* – with given physical environments and significant others. Thus, temporality, locality, and social interactions are not motionless matrices that shape young people’s educational choices, but are rather potentially transformative resources that can be literally mobilized or immobilized to seek or escape the imagined futures that they have contributed to creating. Both real and potential *spatial mobilities* (Kellerman, 2012) emerge then as a playground where all these dimensions play a role in shaping individual processes of *social mobility*. In this regard, Kaufmann and colleagues (2004) have coined the notion of ‘motility’ to indicate the convergence of both spatial and social mobilities, and defined it ‘as the manner in which an individual or a group appropriates the field of possibilities relative to movement and uses them’ (Kaufmann and Montulet, 2008: 45). What is especially relevant to our analysis is that motility is a form of capital that can be exchanged with other forms of capital, which is informed by processes of access and restriction, the acquisition of competences, and the appropriation of choices (Kaufmann et al., 2004). The way in which time, place and social network dimensions interact with the memories, aspirations, and experiences of mobility to shape the educational choices of underprivileged Romanian Roma youths is the content of the next pages.



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## 6. *Methods and research context*

The fieldwork of this research was carried out as an ethnographic doctoral research (Piemontese, 2017) that started in the spring of 2014 with a mixed group (girls and boys) of 20 Roma<sup>3</sup> pre-adolescents, adolescents, and young adults from a rural village in Southern Romania, residing in Madrid. The research developed in space and time ‘literally following connections, associations and putative relationships’ (Marcus, 1995) along the networks and phases of their urban and transnational mobility. While conducting multi-sited ethnography has allowed us to observe patterns of mobility, immobility, and return in both countries, the use of social media turned into a valuable tool for observing the self-representations and the self-reflections related to these experiences (Parker Webster and Marques da Silva, 2013). Also, audio-visual methodologies (Russell, 2007; White, 2009) and collaborative explorations (Milstein, 2010; Sime, 2008; Tucker, 2013) were used with the aim of further incorporating the participants’ own perspectives. Building on this methodological set, the following biographic accounts are based on data collected through collaborative interviews, ethnographic notes, videos recordings, and social media.<sup>4</sup> These sets of data also include the information shared by significant adults, such as parents, older siblings, schoolteachers and educators interviewed during the fieldwork. To a certain extent, we can interpret these accounts as ‘choral narratives’ that reflect both the collaborative, multi-format way in which data have been collected, as well as – and most importantly – the relational landscape that shapes the social navigations of their protagonists.

For the purpose of this article we will consider the school-to-work transitions of four boys (17-20 years old at the time of writing) originating from the same village, Trandafireni, but presenting different experiences of im/mobility: urban and international, wanted and unwanted, real and imagined. Whereas policymakers and educators are used to contrasting the educational attitudes of immigrant youths with those of local students, we follow the approach of van Geel and Mazzucato (2017) of comparing young people who move with those who do not move with the aim of understanding how mobility affects young people’s lives. Accordingly, we conceptualize mobility as a process that also includes remembered, hoped-for, and observed mobility, and not merely the act of moving (Crivello, 2011: 396). This is the

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<sup>3</sup> In this article, we use the term Roma to refer to individuals who self-identify as *țigani romanizați* (Romanianized or assimilated Gypsies), an expression that designate those Romanian Roma communities that have abandoned traditional Roma languages and customs (Leggio and Matras, 2017; Vergnano, 2016). The usage of the term Roma has been the subject of intense debates both among scholars and policy makers (Matras, 2013; Surdu, 2015). Then, although we do not use it in brackets, it should be always understood as a politically constructed expression, which however has the merit of avoiding racialized constructions associated with other denominations. In reality, our research participants identify themselves as *țigani* when speaking in Romanian and *gitanos* when speaking in Spanish. Nevertheless, it is not ours the task of claiming the use of these terms as categories of hetero-identification.

<sup>4</sup> With ‘collaborative interviews’ we understand the act of the researcher conducting formal interviews together with a research participant who is in charge of leading the interviews and adding contents when it comes to shared experiences. In our case, Adrian co-conducted the interview to Nicolae, who in turn (and together with his brother) co-conducted the interviews to Valeriu and Fabian, also acting as linguistic mediator.

most insightful approach into the lives of young people originating from a village like Trandafireni, whose inhabitants are well integrated into the network of transnational migration – more so than many other European citizens –, and where those who do not experience migration in the first person are at least privileged spectators thereof. As we will see, considering the aspirational and actual trajectories of mobile and immobile youth illuminates ‘the multisided relational settings in which their life projects are embedded, and the changing external structures of opportunities’ (Boccagni, 2017: 2).

In compliance with this approach, the biographies described in this paper are presented in an order that entails increasing physical and metaphorical separation from the home village: first migrant, then returnee, then left-behind, and finally non-migrant profiles are taken into account. Similarly, the work orientations of the four protagonists embrace different degrees of labor market positioning, including a criminal career, rural work, athletic vocation, and regular employment. Despite each participant experiencing his transition in a different way, their biographies reveal several commonalities that make them appropriate for comparison. First, they all originate from the same Roma district of Trandafireni, meaning that despite having non-identical experiences of inter-ethnic boundaries and different understandings of their ethnicity, being (identified as) Roma has been critical in shaping all of their early socialization processes. Second, they are young males who share ties of kinship and friendship, and who were taking their first steps into adulthood from a common background of social norms, beliefs, sub-cultural values and, most importantly, gendered-biased labor market prospects and expectations. The focus on male voices, however, should not lead to the hasty conclusion that the educational and post-educational routes of their female peers are dissimilar either in terms of constraints or aspirations, as has been shown elsewhere (Piemontese, 2018). Third, they each have a disengaged and low-achieving academic past: all of them went through phases of absenteeism and disaffection with school and were pushed into remedial educational schemes or segregated schools, and (with only one exception) dropped out towards the end of compulsory education. Fourth, their household economies are partly dependent on the intervention of either Spanish or Romanian social services, thus relying on the subscription of ‘inclusion agreements’ linking the provision of economic benefits to a commitment to attend compulsory education or undertake community work. Finally, they were all born within the five year period before the lifting of EU visa requirements for Romanian citizens in 2002, when the prospect of migrating to Spain arose in the minds of their parents more strongly than before, as it did with many other Romanian citizens (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2017).

The biographies exposed in this paper are not representative of the impact of mobility and migration on the educational careers of Roma youths in general, since the data on which they are based have been collected within a very specific migration network. However, since these stories reveal the very mechanisms that reproduce inequality in and through education under a condition of im/mobility, we believe that the conclusion of this paper can be generalized to other young people who share similar experiences of spatial mobility, segregation, and material deprivation. To a given extent, this paper may be also interpreted as an endeavor to explore the processes that leave underprivileged Roma behind – or *vice versa*, support individuals

to get ahead in education and work - leaving 'Roma ethnicity' out of the picture (Piemontese, 2015), thus 'transcending the ethnic frame of reference' (Stewart, 2010: 10) by addressing the topic in the larger frame of youth scholarships. Moreover, while the diverse transitions exposed in this paper may contribute to de-essentializing the understanding of Roma youths growing up in disadvantaged contexts, the article should be considered in the frame of broader scholarly research on 'youths affected by mobility' (Bereményi and Carrasco, 2017; Carrasco and Narciso, 2018) where the purpose of researching non-Roma alongside Roma youths (Tremlett, 2009; 2014) was actually achieved.

## *7. Adrian*

Adrian (18 years old) moved from rural Romania to Madrid with his mother at the end of 2005, when he was only five years old. His father had then been squatting in an abandoned building in the Northern part of the city for almost three years, making an irregular living as a scrap metal collector. Only a couple of years after the family was reunited, dreams of the life they had hoped to have in Spain were suddenly interrupted by the first of many police evictions. After that, and for more than a decade, they were forced to move from place to place, consequently having to adopt a series of residential strategies in an attempt to ensure access to decent housing. This, however, never happened. Accordingly, Adrian, during the time of his compulsory education (2006 to 2016), had no choice but to move constantly with his parents to self-constructed shacks, motorhomes, ruined buildings, rented apartments and empty mortgaged properties.

The continuous restructuring of household priorities and the non-negotiable need to 'make a new home' following each move negatively intertwined with a wide range of material, social and psychological constraints, discouraging Adrian from going to school. In the long run, such precarious housing conditions, together with an especially permissive and uninvolved parenting style, further intensified a pre-existent 'sense of caution' towards formal education. This triggered a belated and intermittent educational trajectory, translated into poor grades. Adrian did not go to school until 2010, when he enrolled in fourth grade.<sup>5</sup> This first contact with the Spanish education system came after the intervention of the local social services, which was intended to provide a public response to the irregular occupation of an abandoned building that was highly problematized by neighbors and in the local media. However, like other young squatters, Adrian went to school for a couple of months only until the building was evicted. During the following two years he did not receive an education. He returned to school only when his family found a more stable place to live in the district becoming more open to make an 'inclusion agreement' with social service agents.

When we first met in the summer of 2014, Adrian had just finished his first year of secondary school after repeating sixth grade. At the beginning, falling behind

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<sup>5</sup> In Spain, primary school lasts six years (grades 1 to 6) and secondary education is divided into two stages: a unified compulsory track (grades 7 to 10) and a non-compulsory specialization track (grades 11 and 12).

did not represent a source of discouragement to him. 'With time, I will learn', he used to repeat both to teachers and to himself: he was confident that it was a matter of making up for lost time. But later, in spite of being truly convinced of the advantages of attending secondary school, he became increasingly reluctant to spend his mornings confined with other students in a full-time compensatory class taught by a series of willing but undertrained temporary teachers:

I get bored at school. [The teacher is used to] asking us what we want to do, whether Math or other things, and sometimes it's Math, sometimes other things, like drawing or playing [...] There are five of us, but normally [we should be] 21, but they do not come: sometimes Antonio is there and Alex is not there, for example, or the opposite. They stay at home.

Therefore, during the second year he also began to skip school more and more frequently: his academic engagement, which was already very poor, dropped so inexorably that the following term he was pushed into an early vocational route for compensatory students (PCPI). The school counsellor and parents persuaded him to choose to study electro-mechanics, neglecting his desire to become a hairdresser: the counsellor told them that it was too much of a feminine choice for a boy. Two months later, he dropped out of the PCPI. In the following year, he took a carpentry course, but just *pro forma*, to comply with the requirements of social services. In 2017, his life underwent an important transformation: he became a father. At that time he was still financially dependent on his parents, thus he began to contribute to the household economy by collecting scrap metal and – like one of his older brothers – committing petty thefts.

Besides the influence that both economic and institutional constraints had on Adrian's school trajectory, broader socio-emotional and relational aspects shaped his last years of education. Since his late childhood, the reassuring and caring presence of his older brother, Aurel, had progressively balanced both the unreliable figure of the father and a busy mother overwhelmed with productive and reproductive roles. After Aurel died of cancer in 2015, Adrian was left without the only person who had made him feel protected: another older brother was serving a sentence in prison, and another one would have joined him very soon. Adrian's mourning was soon replaced by the self-imposed belief that he had to fill the now empty spot that his older brother had left. He had taken on new responsibilities the previous year, as his parents had spent most of their time either next to their older son's hospital bed or leaning over garbage bins on the street. Adrian was often asked to take care of his younger siblings or to help his illiterate mother communicate with doctors and social workers. With Aurel passing away, he had even more on his plate. During an interview, he explained that such 'care work' eventually became one of the main reasons why he had failed sixth grade. However, it also became a plausible excuse that he used with teachers to justify school absenteeism. Interestingly, this strategy had the side effect of limiting teachers' efforts to make school an attractive place to Adrian, as it induced them to blame his parents for his erratic school attendance. Moreover, the school also lost its initial attractiveness as a space for socialization:

Well, now that I'm not going to school too much, I'll start to quit because I almost do not know anything anymore. I forgot what I have to do [...] I don't care, because I know where my friends live, so I do not care. If I had no friends, I would say, 'Fuck! I should stay on at school!' But, as I told you, since I already have friends, I do not care if I continue or not.

Faced with a disruptive educational career and surrounded by other Roma and non-Roma young people with similar experiences of residential and educational segregation, and even criminal records, the future that Adrian could imagine began to narrow. Although his parents consistently reminded him that without an education he would become indigent like them, scrap metal collection and a criminal career started to seem his most plausible options.

### *8. Nicolae*

Stefano: What does your mother think about education?

Nicolae: What do you think she believes?

Nicolae (19 years old) and Adrian have similar migratory trajectories and an equally complicated housing situation. However, in Nicolae's biography the distress and the ambitions of a returned migrant who had to adjust to the circular mobility of his family are also present. Everything began at the end of 2002, when his father moved to Madrid and settled in a recently developed shantytown located in the Southern part of the city. His wife joined him one year later and after several months, the couple went back to Romania to get their children and the grandfather and take them to Spain. For almost five years, that abandoned piece of ground flattened between ruined walls, crowded with scrap metal and infested with rats, became the playground for a prolific ecology of peer relationships that would become the most powerful and durable that its young inhabitants would establish. Following an eviction, Adrian ended up on the doorstep of Nicolae's shack, who offered himself as a 'cicerone' to the new neighbor: from then onwards - and despite their own personalities and situations - their bond grew stronger and stronger alongside an intensifying sequence of shared eviction experiences and irregular occupations that inextricably weaved together the destinies of their respective families. However, before embarking on this residential odyssey, Nicolae's life was shaken by a series of tragic events that shaped the livelihood of his household. In less than two years, both his grandfather and then his father passed away, meaning that the family had to sell the former's house in their hometown to ship his remains back to Romania. Moreover, until then the father had been the most important source of income they had in Spain. The eviction of the shantytown in 2009 thickened the plot, leaving the family homeless in both transnational localities and placing the mother in a subordinate yet relatively advantaged condition of dependency on both social services and the extended family. This situation allowed the household to pursue a moderate upward housing career that culminated three years later in the loan-based purchase of a small house in the hometown, and moving into an empty mortgaged apartment in Madrid that was in good shape. Before this, the family

changed house five times within five years, returning to Romania once in the context of a municipal 'voluntary repatriation' program.

Under these conditions, Nicolae's educational trajectory progressed in a fragmented but somehow steady way. Although he had attended kindergarten in Romania, in Madrid he did not enroll in school until the year before the shantytown eviction, which is when he started fourth grade. Hence, he successfully attended the last three years of primary education. Such continuity was sporadically interrupted by forced evictions and changes of school, which were promptly redressed by the uncompromising school-oriented attitude of the mother, which had undoubtedly been encouraged by the social services. However, in 2011, the 'voluntary repatriation' program of the municipality that came after another eviction interrupted Nicolae's educational career. Back in Romania, he was unable to enroll due to bureaucratic impediments related to the validation of the previous courses he had taken, so he lost one year of school. When he returned to Madrid with his family, he enrolled two consecutive times in the first year of secondary school (seventh grade). This period, however, was marked by him entering into conflict with some schoolmates who stigmatized him as 'poor and Gypsy'. In addition, some teachers addressed Nicolae's disruptive behavior through misuse of school expulsions, failing to understand the root of his misconduct, and irresponsibly neglecting the effects of further interruptions. Despite this, when we first met in the summer of 2014, Nicolae was an enthusiastic teenager aware of his privileged position as a student within the family, who looked forward to seeing him enrolled in an early vocational route (PCPI) in car mechanics that, he hoped, would allow him to find a decent job soon:

My mother, she really wants me to study, but since she knows that I'm not doing well at school [...] well, she and the teachers decided to sign me up for a PCPI. I love the idea! I already have friends who are mechanics, older people. I love it! I want to study four years as mechanic and become a professional, with a driving license and everything.

All these ambitions were interrupted by his mother's rapidly deteriorating health after she was diagnosed with cancer in an advanced state. This implied that the family had to return to Romania. There, after feeling excited at the beginning, Nicolae began to realize that his rural village offered him very little compared to Madrid. A series of improvised house parties and some sporadic visits to the capital city revealed his pointless attempts to maintain a cheerful, urban lifestyle. He struggled to recognize that the conditions around him had radically changed and that he, too, had to change. He began to feel increasingly bored and quietly resented his mother during that time: although he felt at home, he also felt out of place. Paradoxically, he could not go to school because, afraid of losing the Spanish social benefits that were the family's only source of income, the mother had not requested the documents needed to enroll her older child in Romania. Subsequently, as the benefits ended after several months, the prospects of school disappeared. The family had to rely on the minimal economic support of local social services, his younger siblings were virtually destitute, and the older sister was taking care of the housework, so Nicolae needed to speed up his transition to the labor market. Just as his strong, one year younger brother had found



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his way in the construction sector, Nicolae, skinny and not very tall, had no option but to become part of the seasonal, underpaid, rural labor force. His almost insignificant and unstable earnings hardly covered the debts that the family accumulated with grocery shops during the winter. For a while, Nicolae looked for a job in the catering sector, but failed to find one as he did not have the right experience and the right acquaintances. Under these circumstances, migration seemed to be the only way out of poverty and so, at the beginning of 2017 when he turned 18, he planned to move back to Madrid to look for a better job, just like his father had done 15 years before, but with a fundamental difference: for Nicolae, working as an irregular scrap metal collector was out of the question.

### *9. Valeriu*

Valeriu (17 years old) was only two years old when his mother moved to Spain in 2003. After that, he grew up with his grandparents in a small house at the edge of the Roma district of Trandafireni, close to Nicolae's future home. His dad continued to live in the ethnic-Romanian sector of the village where he was from, while the mother spent most of her time abroad, returning to the hometown for short periods. After kindergarten, Valeriu went to primary school and proved to be a fairly good student. From then on, he enrolled in middle school and, impressed by the facilities of the new center and fascinated by the presence of pupils from the other neighborhood, he was very enthusiastic about starting his first year.<sup>6</sup> Along with other classmates, Valeriu was soon invited to take part in trial boxing lessons taught by the sports teacher, a charismatic man who just a couple of years before had managed to convince the principal and the city council to allow him to set up a boxing gym within the school. He was also a talent scout for the Romanian Boxing Federation who saw left-handed Valeriu's potential as a future boxer in his first punch.

Encouraged by his extended family and welcomed by the trainer, Valeriu entered the universe of boxing without giving it much thought. However, during the following school year he considered quitting as he was demoralized by this time-consuming activity that did not bring immediate results. This crisis was closely linked to his increasingly poor academic performance, as Valeriu had begun to hang out and skip school with older students. While his teachers were keen on tolerating the vanishing of a few 'troublemakers' from their classes, Valeriu's mother tried – from a distance and without much success – to warn her son about the risk of ending up like her: uneducated and forced to migrate to find a job. In this context, the mediation of the trainer represented a real turning point for Valeriu. Making the most of their trusting relationship, the coach encouraged his protégé to stay in the team. Soon after, when Valeriu started winning his first matches and gaining self-confidence, the coach tried to convince him that doing well at school would be an asset for his future boxing career: allowing to enroll in a sports secondary school and eventually becoming a trainer as well.

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<sup>6</sup> In Romania, primary school lasts four years (grades 1 to 4). Secondary school is divided into three stages: a unified compulsory track, or middle school (grades 5 to 8), a compulsory specialization track (grades 9 and 10) and a non-compulsory specialization track (grades 11 and 12). In Trandafireni, young people need to commute daily to the county capital to attend school after eighth grade.

I improved a bit because of boxing because my trainer told me to go to school; otherwise, he would have stopped training with me. Sometimes I [still] learn because I think about boxing, because my coach always tells me to study, because it is good for boxing, too. So, whenever I think about boxing I learn well, but when I do not think about boxing, I do not learn.

However, just as Valeriu had overcome the aforementioned crisis and immediately before starting seventh grade, he realized that he wanted to be reunited with his mother. After many years of intermittent visits, they both intended to reinvigorate their lost relationship so they applied for a passport, got permission to travel from the father, bought plane tickets and prepared for departure. However, Valeriu's grandparents opposed the plan, worried about the disruptive consequences that a long absence would trigger on a pathway that had only recently become stable. Valeriu ended up staying. In 2015, his promising athletic career was in an ascending phase: he had recently won the under-16 national boxing cup, and although he was still at middle school, he was offered a place at a sports secondary school in the county capital. In the long run, his plan was to become a professional boxer and study physical education at university and become a trainer himself. Interestingly enough, this trajectory was supported both by the coach and Valeriu's mother. The former regularly paid for Valeriu's equipment and sports-related trips, while the mother's remittances had allowed her child to afford to live a similar life to that of his more affluent teammates. This might mitigate Valeriu's perception of marginalization.

It was good to have my mother's money. The other guys had money in their pockets and I would have felt bad without that money. Without that money, I would not have gone to boxing any more.

Valeriu's boxing ambitions had progressively shaped his educational and professional orientation and even his plans for im/mobility. The way to this was paved by the reward from his daily effort, which took him one step closer to the future he hoped for and which had been revealed by the sport he was practicing. The more he progressed as an athlete, the more it became clear that boxing could open up alternative pathways – which he had not believed in before – towards social and spatial mobility. After seeing older team members earn good money from their victories, he began to believe that he, too, could climb the social ladder and – as he repeated to himself – ‘achieve something in life.’ Likewise, their stories about international competitions held in foreign countries contributed to repopulating his ideas about mobility. Although his view about the ‘world abroad’ was previously framed under the category of labor migration, now he perceived this collective imaginary with suspicion. Moreover, after witnessing the disruptive transitions of his returned peers, his ideas about Spain changed from that of a hoped-for mythical destination to a neutral passing station in his way to future international competitions. When we last met in 2016, Valeriu had been selected for the under-16 European boxing championship. However, neither his mother nor his trainer could pay for his travel and subsistence costs abroad for such a long period. To ‘live life like a champion and never fall

behind' – as he read on an advertisement for sporting goods – would not be easy, and would take him a lot of effort to achieve.

Every minute I am training I think very strongly about one sentence: fight now that you are young, because later you will be a champion.

## 10. *Fabian*

Fabian (20 years old) grew up with his parents and a younger sister in a small two-room house located in the ethnic-Roma district of Trandafireni. Since his childhood, the livelihood of his household had always depended on his dad's short-term, irregular and underpaid jobs, which were mainly connected to the construction sector. Despite the humble and precarious life that such a family economy could provide, migration never really came up as an alternative: the mother went to Spain only once as a seasonal agricultural worker. Although the father had been planning to look for a temporary job abroad for a long time, he ultimately decided to stay in Romania, where he could still rely on a strong network of contacts that allowed him to work 'every day, every month, and for everyone.'

As for Fabian, after kindergarten he enrolled in primary school and then middle school: he was an average pupil who went through school without much trouble, at least until his first and only failure in eighth grade. Fabian never had any specific ambitions, so when it came to choosing an upper secondary school track he preferred to choose a less demanding vocational route and chose hairstyling. However, given the lack of available places in this field, he was forced to pursue a career in telecommunications. During the first year (ninth grade) Fabian was intimidated by the unfamiliar environment of the new center and excited by the chance of breathing in a bit of the urban atmosphere of the county capital at the same time. Nevertheless, he began to lose interest in school very soon. In addition to other reasons, comparison with other peers from the ethnic Roma district who already had work experience as they had dropped out earlier, or finished compulsory education in due time, Fabian started to think about leaving school to look for a job. He wanted to earn his own money and become financially independent. What discouraged him from following this path was the rumor that the Romanian government had decided that compulsory education was a prerequisite for obtaining a driving license, which was something Fabian wished to pursue. In spite of his attempt to examine the opportunity cost of his intimate aspirations, during the last year of compulsory education (tenth grade), Fabian became increasingly disengaged with school: he started skipping classes, finally dropping out five weeks before the end of the term. At this point, both the principal and the parents intervened by talking to him about the risk of entering the labor market without a diploma. In addition, a social worker warned him that he would have to do community work if he wanted to keep the monthly allowance for dependent minors – a small yet important amount of money that had allowed Fabian to adopt socially significant consumption practices (transportation, leisure, clothes). Caught between family pressure, the burden of community work, losing his pocket money, and the concrete risk of not obtaining a diploma, Fabian decided to complete tenth grade. During the summer, he still was not

sure about staying in school and the pressure his parents placed on him to finish completion secondary education did not help. All he knew was that ‘something easy’ would fit him. Therefore, filled with uncertainty, he decided to postpone his choice as he was set to work all summer with Nicolae in the countryside and with his father in the construction sector. He thought he would be able to make a better choice based on these experiences. Fabian finally decided to go back to school without giving it much thought but before the end of the year finally gave up: deeply discouraged by the pressure of catching up in four subjects, now of legal age, and relieved of the ‘dependency trap’ of social services and the need to obtain a compulsory education diploma, and also based on his summer work experience, Fabian made a choice neither his parents or teachers could change.

Since 2016, Fabian has been working at a construction company with a regular salary of below the national income average, but still sufficiently high for the underprivileged 18-year old rural youth. Sometimes, during his early adolescence, Fabian had wanted to move to Spain to find his fortune, following the example of other peers who had migrated with their parents. However, as time went by and they started to return, he learnt that migration is indeed a risky venture. Much like his parents, besides having a natural fascination about the ‘world abroad’, Fabian has no migratory ambitions and actually trusts in the opportunities that Romania may offer him in the near future.

Nicolae: How is it possible that you still live here, that you don’t go to another country, that you are always in the same state of poverty? Do you not want to earn money? Going to another country – it changes your life!

Fabian: Yes, I desire another life, but I have got used to this one. I will stay with what I have.

## 11. *Discussion*

The four biographies presented in this paper show how the experiences of place and mobility, as well as the social relations available in both dimensions, interact in a reciprocal way to shape the educational and post-educational choices of young people. For underprivileged rural youths, migration may represent an attempt to renegotiate their social position (Thorsen, 2005: 1) and to achieve integration into mainstream society (Azaola, 2012: 884). Nevertheless, their uncertain social navigation is also symptomatic of the ‘regimes of mobility’ (Glick, Schiller, and Salazar, 2013) they undergo in both transnational locations. To understand whether their lives will lead to the reproduction of socio-economic inequalities or the challenge of upwards social mobility, it is necessary to understand the multiple intersections between their experiences of place, mobility, and social capital.

During their lives, our research participants underwent different degrees of residential and educational segregation. For those who migrated to Spain, the inadequate material conditions of shantytowns and squatted buildings, as well as fragmented access to quality education, intensified pre-existing feelings of caution towards formal education acting on both academic achievements and social behaviors. In fact, while parents postponed school enrolment until the housing situation

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improved, the stigmas attached to place of residence, as well as to the family livelihood and ethnicity – squatters, garbage collectors, and ‘Gypsies’ – were the main sources of conflict at school, as has more exhaustively been shown elsewhere (Piemontese, 2018). These conditions triggered belated, interrupted, and conflictive school careers that ultimately pushed our participants towards remedial schemes and punitive measures: over time, these circumstances profoundly modified their ideas about how school education can create the desired social mobility. In Trandafireni, the boundaries that uncouple the lives of young Roma are much more volatile but are as powerful and ubiquitous as the ethnic and rural divide they shadow. Their early educational careers start within the limits of the Roma district and its run-down school branch, continue in the better-off school headquarters located in the ethnic-Romanian district, and culminate eight terms later with the need to commute to the county capital to finish compulsory education. In both transnational localities, the feeling of entrapment and stigma attached to the place of residence seem to permeate the school environment too. Moreover, from time to time institutional selection mechanisms remind our participants that they are not the main recipients of school education, but ‘visitors’ to a place created for more composed, effective, urban, or non-Roma pupils. As well as not ineluctable, these mechanisms significantly contribute to intensifying a sense of disconnection with the school environment.

In this scenario, residential and school mobility emerges as an element of differentiation that is unequally distributed among migrant and non-migrant students, and affects their educational choices in a rather ambivalent and counterintuitive way. The striking overlapping of urban and transnational mobility that characterizes socio-economically disadvantaged young migrants endows them with ‘mobility capital’ that can be mobilized when needed, but also recreates the conditions that generate such needs. In essence, the cycles of evictions they undergo in Madrid set in motion a series of material and psychological constraints that discourage school enrolment, promote frequent changes of school and temporary withdrawals, and bring about ‘falling behind careers’ that require greater academic effort to catch up with the curriculum, as well as greater ability to re-establish social bonds with fellow students. With such educational trajectories behind them, young returnees to Romania face bureaucratic impediments related to the validation of their previous academic paths, which in most cases contribute to interrupting an already fragmented educational career. Nevertheless, it is in the blind alley of the return where the chances of social mobility seem to vanish forever, and that the ‘mobile self’ enters the picture. The process of continuously evaluating the countries of origin and destination that guides the formation of autonomous life plans among young returnees turns mobility from a *negative* source of unsuccessful school careers into a *positive* asset that can be mobilized to broaden labor market opportunities into an imagined elsewhere which is detailed and familiar. Strong in their double frame of reference, returned migrants often blame those who stay for ‘not knowing anything about the world abroad.’ This perspective, however, could be misleading. Young people with no direct experience of migration are witnesses to the departures and returns of parents, neighbors, and friends, and have even themselves considered the idea of migrating. At the same time they take advantage of those educational and relational resources that their returned peers lack. The uninterrupted educational careers allow them to complete

compulsory education with more ease, deeper, locally rooted social networks provide less complicated entries into secure labor market positions. In addition, they also start practicing mobility at a regional level for work and educational reasons. Under these conditions, *mobilizing mobility* and *mobilizing immobility* emerge as two alternative strategies that underprivileged Roma youths endowed with different ‘mobility capitals’ adopt to overcome situations of deprivation and develop their autonomous life transitions.

Ultimately, transnational mobility has indisputably allowed young migrants to project their social horizons onto the super-diverse landscape of the Spanish periphery, fostering wider and vibrant social relations. However, the residential strategies adopted by their families play out against such a potentially expanding relational trend, pushing them progressively to strengthen ‘bonding’ socio-emotional ties with adults and peers who share the same origins and housing solutions, and weakening at the same time ‘bridging networks’ (Putnam, 2004) with other people outside the ethnic, immigrant, and homeless community. In such an unstable environment, the closer reference group formed by other underprivileged Roma immigrants turns into the primary source of trust, reciprocity, emotional support, and identity for young people (Reynolds, 2007) which however also contributes to reinforcing a sense of ‘narrower self’ (Putnam, 2000; in: Jørgensen, 2016). Back in the hometown, smoother school and housing careers instead endow youths who are ‘non-affected by mobility’ with a less vibrant and dense, yet deeper social capital. This may potentially foster ‘social leverage’ processes (de Souza Briggs, 1998): ‘few but good’ relations that suffice to enable meaningful connections outside the district community within the labor market, and which may also influence the way home is experienced, and images of mobility are repopulated.

## 12. *Concluding notes*

The transitions to adulthood of underprivileged youths are particularly diverse and unpredictable as they are shaped by – and contribute to shaping – processes of mobility and immobility across and within borders, schools, and homes. Having a baby, becoming a breadwinner, picturing oneself in the shoes of a significant other, or seeking economic independence, are equally significant pathways to adulthood. Nevertheless, focusing on educational choices offers a privileged window into how youths construct their future and seek to escape the forces of social reproduction, either mobilizing or repopulating ideas about mobility and immobility.

Before anything else, the biographies exposed in this paper disclose the *negotiated and constrained nature of educational choices* in contexts of deprivation. Deciding about education is the result of collective processes of deliberation which take place within the family, may include other trusted individuals, and are informed by specific intergenerational dependencies (Carrasco, Ballestín and Borison, 2007; Colombo, 2011; Crivello, 2011; Punch, 2015). Throughout this process, the universalistic ‘doxic logic’ predicated by institutional agents that informs parental admonitions and timidly shapes individual educational aspirations enters into conflict with the ‘habituated logic’ of the individual biographical experience. We have observed how impoverished Roma parents warn their children of the risk that



leaving formal education will reproduce a condition of destitution within the family. At the same time, efforts of these Roma parents collapse in the perceived zero-sum game frame between the *uncertainty* of future rewards attached to current academic efforts, and the *familiarity* of a precarious life they have nevertheless always managed to deal with. Such underlying feelings of resignation jeopardize the unaffected enthusiasm encountered during early periods of schooling and turn economic precariousness from a potential source of bolder aspirations into the origins of prudent educational choices. These are the consequences of long-lasting processes of social, academic, and emotional disaffection with school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004) that are deeply rooted in pre-existing institutional and structural constraints. The ability of underprivileged youths to engage in and progress through school education seems to be squeezed between the experience of stigma and segregation associated with the residential space and reproduced within the school by spatially conceived provisions for ethnic or disengaged students (Thompson et al., 2014: 66), and non-intersectional community-based ‘social security arrangements’ (de Jong, 2005) aimed at overcoming severe situations of ‘deprotection’ but which have a centripetal effect on ‘bonding’ networks and a centrifugal effect on ‘bridging’ social capital.

Thus, in scenarios tending towards social immobility, the *influence of bridging social capital on educational choices* seems to be crucial. Cultivating social relations outside the closer reference group – namely, having broader social capital in terms of extension, articulation, and variability in available social interactions – not only provides wider access to material resources like jobs and loans, but also supplies alternative images of the future. Virtually, the role of networks in shaping hoped-for or aspired-to possible selves is rooted in the very mechanisms of social comparison which describe the act of relating information about others to oneself in such a way that estimated differences and similarities influence judgment, cognitions, motivations, and behaviors (Corcoran, Crusius and Mussweiler, 2011). The capacity of young people to picture themselves in other persons may either disclose new narratives about adulthood or reaffirm pre-existing ones; make future rewards visible or keep them invisible; encourage bolder aspirations or reproduce prudent educational and post-educational choices. What really matters is the social positioning from which comparison with school-oriented adults and peers is formulated. While comparisons *on an equal basis* are more likely to bring about the idea that ‘progressing through education’ is the most appropriate route for seeking upward social mobility, *subordinated* processes of comparison are more likely to restrict attempts to achieve integration into mainstream society to socially significant consumption models.

In this context, the processes of spatial in/mobility emerge as a valuable yet ambivalent resource of social upward mobility, whose transformative potential is largely dependent on the relational settings and the external structures of opportunities into which they are embedded. The ability to navigate conjunctures and networks, to cultivate deeper relations with significant others, and to mobilize processes of mobility and immobility ‘can only exist in interconnectedness and be brought about in relations’ (Raithelhuber, 2016:96); in other words, to act like a purposeful and agentic social being. Therefore, to support underprivileged young people to act intentionally, parents and educators must transfer the idea of

understanding education as an investment in the future. And to have bolder ambitions, we should transform public policies in a way that they do not require the courage to aspire, but only to achieve. Addressing undesired sources of residential mobility and school segregation is a first step in this direction.

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